

Come Hell, High Water by naiesu

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Relationships: Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Will Byers/Mike Wheeler

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Summary:

“It’s been months, Mike,” Lucas says, staring at Mike, hard. Mike can’t remember a time he didn’t look at him that way. “Will is a cold case. You need to accept that.”

Mike is cold, and for one terrifying moment he feels the numbness wash over him. Everybody in the group is either looking at Mike, or at something that isn’t the two of them. Is that it then? Will Mike’s silenced protests be the last voice turning away from the boy that was Will Byers?

Maybe he should.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

A huge shout out and an endless supply of thanks to my friend Hezza. Without them this fic would've topped off at about 100 words and died in my WIP folder as a joke. If you have time, please [go check out](#) their stuff!

"Mike," Will sighs, toeing at exasperation, but Mike knows he's pushed just the right amount when he hears Will's smile. "I'll make it back before 11 tonight. OK?"

Mike feigns a gasp. "Will, is that a promise you're sure you can keep?" he asks, leaning against the kitchen wall. He pulls at the cord with his free hand, twirling it around his fingers and letting it go so it bounces against his stomach. He feels giddy. "El got here an hour ago."

"Mike." Will is laughing now, laughing as he speaks, and Mike smiles into the receiver.

"OK, OK," he says, pushing away from the wall. He bounces up on his toes once, "I'll see you when you get home."

"That's the last time I talked to him," Joyce says, hand fisted against her mouth. Her voice warbles, nervous and impatient with their little game, but playing nonetheless.

Hopper asks her something else, standing where everyone else sits. His expression gives the immediate impression of authority, and it's a stark contrast to everything else about him--resting against the kitchen counter, clad in pajamas and bedhead. Mike doesn't hear a thing he says. His mind is a sinkhole, memories of tar, sucking him back into the past when he's least paying attention and holding him under.

Joyce answers for what feels like an hour, voice rising and falling, and Hopper sighs, frustrated. He starts pacing back and forth beside the kitchen table. His feet thud on the tiled kitchen floors, and for

some reason this, as opposed to Jonathan's nail biting and Joyce's tapping, is what's adding that extra layer to Mike's skin, fine as sand and just as abrasive.

He grits his teeth. "Would you--!"

"Jim, say something," Joyce says, cutting Mike off. He looks at her, but he's not sure if he's mad or thankful.

"I--" Hopper finally stops, and he ducks his head, shaking it. He scrubs his hand through his hair.

Patience is an agonizing virtue, and one Mike's never possessed. "Don't just sit there," he snaps. "Say something."

"I'm thinking," Hopper grits out, glaring. He runs his fingers through his hair again.

"You're supposed to be *doing* ." Mike stands up from the table, but stays in his place, leaning against it. It groans under his weight. "You're supposed to be *out there*, like the *last* two times this happened. But you're *thinking*?!" He leans forward. "If I needed ideas, I'd've found someone with a few more brain cells."

Eleven, who had been a silent participant of the conversation, looks up at him, lips thinned. "Mike," she says, quiet but with clear warning.

Joyce and Jonathan, however, say nothing. Joyce chews her lip, staring at the table, and when Mike doesn't hear any protest from them, he looks back at Hopper.

"Listen, kid," Hopper says, just as dangerously as Eleven, "I'm doing everything I can with what little I have to work with."

"*It's not enough.*" The words are barbed and acidic and Mike means each one of them. He hopes they hurt. He hopes they sting for the rest of the night, the week, until the *year's* up.

Mike shoves away from the table, and it skitters across the floor. He grabs his coat from the back of his chair, thrusting his arm into it so hard it snags, but he doesn't care. His only worry is where *he'll* go

from there, and what *he's* going to do.

"Mike," Joyce says, but the protest is halfhearted. She's too consumed with her own grief to worry about him. He knows the feeling.

The front door slams when he shuts it, and although he doesn't mean to do it, so does the door to his car. It's freezing, cold enough today that his car needs defrosting, but Mike doesn't move to turn his key in the ignition. He wraps his hands around the steering wheel, letting his fingers sink into the leather cover, and drops his head down.

The tears burn his cheeks, and he wonders if crying hurts more than holding it back.

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"You know, Mike," Will says, *soft, softer than when they're normally talking alone.*

Mike stops reading the book for his bullshit english course--required, of course, or else he wouldn't be taking it. That's why it's bullshit--and looks at Will. It's dark outside, sunset is starting to fall earlier and earlier in the day, and the Christmas lights they've strung around the kitchen throw unearthly shadows over Will's pallid skin. Mike wonders if it's from the stress of school, but wondering is useless when he knows the nightmares always attack Will the worst around this time of year.

"Yeah?" he asks, *prompting Will to continue.*

It takes a long time for him to keep talking, and Mike stays quiet while he waits. His mood is a stark contrast from earlier, solemn and dark. "Do you remember years ago," he says, *so quiet it's barely more than a whisper, "when Mr. Clark taught us about parallel universes?"*

Mike's brain takes off with the information as soon as it's mentioned, excited to ramble about something he loves. "Yeah, a facet of the astronomical theory of--" He bites his lip when he remembers that Will isn't a puzzle or riddle he's trying to solve. *"Yeah."*

It takes even longer for Will to speak than before. His hands are still where they rest over the top of his paper, pencil hovering over a doodle in the margin.

"I don't think I was meant to live in this one."

Mike hesitates just before dropping his keys on the table. Will hadn't looked at him once when he'd spoken yesterday night, and Mike hadn't seen him after that. It's like prodding at a gaping wound the way he feels standing in the middle of his kitchen, and he doesn't know how he dealt with it as a child without breaking the way he has already.

It's only been a day, he reminds himself. Berating, maybe, for crying, or perhaps a reminder that he shouldn't give up hope. He closes the door of the apartment and walks back down to his car.

A nagging, callous thought claws its way to the forefront of his mind, and he stops next to his car, fingers wrapped around the handle.

Think of all the things that could happen in a day.

He doesn't want to, he *can't*. What if it was only a kidnapping? What if Will went through everything, *everything*, only to be murdered by some psychopath that happened to choose *him* of all people off the side of the street.

And if, instead, it was something far more sinister. Another encounter with the Upside Down? He would be so susceptible to another possession, and what then? What if there wasn't anything left of Will after that?

Mike remembers a day, years ago, standing in a hospital room with an amnesiac, and thinks that may not be such a far reach.

"Shut up," he hisses, head bent over his car. His thoughts do quiet down, then, running by in the background like a brook instead of rapids bearing down on him. They lap, whisper soft, at the edge of his conscience, but protection sometimes comes in the form of isolation, and Mike builds a dam.

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He dreams.

He dreams of Will, sitting in the living room, watching a video on

their paltry television that Mike can't see as anything but static. It's quiet in the apartment, besides that sound, and Mike wants to wonder where Eleven is, but, in the dream, the thought doesn't occur to him that she would even be living there. Instead, he hangs behind the loveseat, curious as to what movie is playing.

"Why are you looking at it like that?" Will asks, but Mike can't turn his head to look at him. He's not sure if it bothers him. "You act like you haven't seen it a million times before."

I don't know what it is, Mike tries to say, feeling placid and calm until he realizes the words won't come. The room is engulfed by the sound of the TV, and everything swims on the edges of his vision. He can't move at all.

He blinks and he's in the kitchen, sitting down. Will is sitting across from him, but he's younger, so much younger, and in his tiny hand is a crayon. His free hand is splayed across the middle of a piece of lined paper, and he doodles in the margin.

Mike watches him for a few seconds, curious and unwilling to bother. "What 'cha drawin'?" He asks, mostly unperturbed by the change save the lingering unease. If he listens hard enough he can hear the static from the living room, but he isn't listening hard enough, and he only hears the soft scratch of Will's drawing.

Will doesn't answer him, but after a long minute he does pass a sheet of paper to Mike's side of the table, and sets the crayons between them both. Mike doesn't hesitate before starting to draw--even though he's a terrible artist in his waking life--and somehow it starts turning into something good. Seconds pass and he looks at the clock, but it's somehow three hours later, and he knows in his mind that it's already the next day and Joyce is going to *kill* him, but he continues to draw. It's not done yet.

Will starts scribbling furiously, but when Mike looks up it's still in the margin of his empty notes, and Mike can't see anything behind Will's other hand. He looks down at his own drawing, fleshing out some of the color.

"They hurt me," Will says, gentle. There's an undercurrent of

something wild beneath his voice, and it nags at Mike. He looks up again.

Will is staring at him, crayon hovering over his paper, but there are no marks on the page.

“They shouldn’t have done that.”

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He wakes up gasping, body chilled in a cold sweat, and grasps at his skin with fingers that claw. *It’s real*, he thinks, *I’m awake*. He’s alone in his old room, his parents are down the hall, and Will is gone. It’s a comfort to know the knowledge is there, waiting at the front of his mind to be called upon when he needs it, but it gets shuttered away immediately after. Comfort or no, the reminder is an unnecessary hurt.

Mike lies in his bed, half his body out of the covers, and looks around the room. His eyes linger on the blinds, the only source of light in the room, and he slides his feet down onto the hardwood floor, hurrying to open them. He feels like a child again, scared to look under his bed and scuttling away from any potential hands that may or may not grab his ankles, but he cuts himself some slack. He knows what lingers in the dark.

The light stays on all night, straining and old and flickering, and Mike stays up with it, writing ideas, possibilities, out on a piece of paper. It’s slow work, and it feels like it’s doing nothing but making him realize that avoiding sleep is working against him. It makes him anxious.

His heart is pounding a steady, uncomfortably heavy tattoo in his chest, and everything shines a bit too bright and tastes a little too much like chemicals, but he doesn’t dare confront his own mind. Not tonight.

Kidnapped. The first of few words on his list, the most obvious idea, the one run by the most. Will worked on a somewhat late shift, and it usually wasn’t a problem, but when he was biking home, and it was cold and wet and dark outside, no one was out. Mike hated to think

that it wasn't the safest area, but it also wasn't *unsafe*.

Got lost. It was impossible. A literal impossibility. Will had been riding that route for a year and a half, there was no physically plausible way he would suddenly forget. And not have money to call someone?

Suddenly decided he didn't want to come home. After calling Mike to tell him when he was coming back?

Mike pinches the bridge of his nose. It's such a small list. Murdered, maybe? But they would've found his body on the route he takes home. Unless Will was kidnapped and *then* murdered, but that would fall under kidnapping, and--

And he hates himself for thinking so clinically. Mike pushes the meat of his palms into his eyes, wanting to forget, wishing none of it had happened in the first place.

"He had to be kidnapped," he murmurs, peeking down at the paper with itchy eyes. Five more words are listed at the bottom.

Slipped into the Upside Down.

But he doesn't want that to have happened, so he crosses it out, and pretends he never wrote it in the first place.

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"Don't," Nancy says over the phone, voice scratchy with sleep, "call him, Mike."

They're talking about Murray Bauman at nine in the morning, when Mike deemed it light enough that his night terrors wouldn't follow him out into the hallway. He pulls at the phone cord, watching it bounce up and down. The paint on the cord is scratched off, and there's wear and tear on the wall. Mike's done it a lot.

"But you said--"

"I *said*," Nancy says, voice strict and correcting. Mike can envision her face, and he deadpans, feeling some old sibling conflicts

simmering in his chest, “that Barb’s parents said he was good. Not me.”

“Yeah, but did he ever actually find a lead on her?”

“No, Mike, he didn’t.”

Mike ignores her worried questions, and hangs up with a half-hearted promise to meet up later.

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Mike does his homework and attends class the next day, but he’s hardly there as more than an additional body in the crowd. He sits in the middle of all his classes, head down, and brainstorms. His heart isn’t in the lectures. His English professor probably doesn’t even know he exists past the names heading his papers.

After class he picks up something quick to eat, and stuffs the change from his meal into the consol, cruising back to the apartment at a leisurely pace in an effort to delay the inevitable. He knows he has to go back eventually, but that doesn’t make him want to go any faster. It’s probably the most he’s ever been honked at in his life.

The apartment is warm when he opens the door, but it’s the kind of warm that comes from a stove or oven, and he doesn’t take off his shoes, too curious about who’s there. It should only be Eleven, but Eleven doesn’t really cook, and there’s too much shuffling for one person.

“Are you cooking spaghetti?” Mike asks as soon as he’s cleared the doorway to the kitchen. Four heads turn to look at him, and conversation drops off abruptly. “Is that all you can make?”

Dustin is hovering by the oven, spoon poised at his mouth, but when Mike speaks he lowers his hand, face pinching in a look Mike can’t describe. Concern maybe? Apology?

He’s waiting for the moment you explode from the stress, like you did before.

Mike doesn’t pay that any thought, noting its truth somewhere where

it buries itself at the back of his mind, waiting for later. He shucks his coat off, dropping it on the back of the last empty chair. No one says anything. “Well?”

“Calm down, Mike,” Lucas says, eyes hard.

He could’ve taken a lot of lines. Passive swipes, something neutral and uncaring--hell, something far angrier would’ve been better. Would’ve been *welcome*. He wants them to share the pain, the anxiety creeping and crawling somewhere between his lungs and throat like a scream he can’t give voice to. He needs to *see it*.

But if there’s one thing Mike’s always hated, it’s platitudes.

“Calm down?” he repeats, incredulous. “What’s there to be calm about? Will is missing. *Again*. Do you remember what happened last time? Because I do! He got sucked into an *alternate dimension*, almost *died*,” he’s listing on his fingers now, moving and speaking with manic expressiveness, “was tormented for *weeks* by some *infinite being*, got *possessed*, had to--”

“You can’t keep doing this!” Lucas yells back at him, jerking away from the table as he stands up. Max, who is sitting on *top* of the table, is forced to brace herself so she doesn’t slip off the side.

“Doing what?!” Mike sweeps his arms around the room. “As far as I know, I’m the only one doing anything at all! You’re all sitting around laughing and eating spaghetti!”

“Well, I mean, it’s not done yet, so no one’s really been eating any,” Dustin says, breaking up the cacophony of voices.

Mike looks at him, disbelieving and besides himself with exasperation, and holds his hands out as if to say, ‘*Really? Right now?*’

Dustin just shrugs, turning back around when the spaghetti sauce pops.

“You have,” Lucas says, and his voice is much quieter now. It sounds as though he’s sucking all the air out of the room and leaving silence in his wake, drawing immediate attention, “a Martyr Complex.”

The insult makes his face flush hot with anger. “Oh, yeah?” he asks, and half of it comes out as a laugh, mean and cutting. He knew as soon as he walked into the room this moment would come to pass, that he would end up hurting someone, that he would try to. “A Martyr Complex, but only in times of *extreme* duress. That sounds about right, doesn’t it? Textbook definition. You don’t even know what that *means*.”

“I don’t need to--”

“You kind of do.”

--to tell you you’re being a dick!” Lucas is shouting again, and Max rubs her temples, leaning away from him. “You don’t have to keep doing this on your own, Mike, we’re all here.” He makes an aborted little gesture with his hands that’s half shrug and halfway like he stopped in the middle of motioning to the four of them.

“We’re all just as worried about him as you are,” he adds, almost as an afterthought.

Are you? Are you really?

Mike looks at him, swallowing past the lump in his throat, and thinks he may start crying again, but the second time he swallows the feeling is gone. Eleven sits her hand on top of his, and he looks at her briefly, thankful for the comfort. She hasn’t stopped staring off into space since he got there.

The peace is broken when Dustin swings around, holding the pot with the noodles. “Yeah! That’s why I’m making the spaghetti!”

Lucas groans, dropping his head. “*Dustin.*”

“Are you guys finally done screaming?” Max asks, looking between them, but she cuts them off before either of them can answer. “Awesome! I’m already sick of hearing your voices, and it’s only been,” she looks at the stove clock, “two minutes.” She slips off the table, picking up a plate, and starts spooning pasta out of the pot despite Dustin’s protests.

It’s like a bubble bursts, letting out some noxious air that’s slowly

been poisoning them over the course of the conversation, and everyone moves over to the stove as one, arguing and laughing and poking fun at each other over a dinner that's been too long in the making.

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But it doesn't last, and why would it? They eat, and they talk about finding Will--who should do what and when, where they'll look, how they'll manage without attracting too much attention. At the end of the night they're left just as empty handed as they started, with Mike and Eleven sitting at their respective places at the kitchen table, silent.

"Mike--"

"Do you think we'll find him?" he asks, staring at his hands.

Eleven looks at him for a long time, silent, like it gets sometimes when it's just the two of them, but something about her gaze makes him want to fidget. After a minute or so, she reaches out, laying her hand on top of his again, and he flips his hand over so their fingers lock. It's grounding, real.

"We will, Mike," she says, but her tone sounds different than normal. Less sure, not as brusque and blunt, like she's trying her hand at a softer kind of comfort. Mike's not sure how he feels about it, but then she's right back to normal. "We saved him once, and we did it again, and we'll *do* it again, and again--"

"Why does there have to be a fourth time?!" Mike cries, jerking his head up.

She only stares at him, eyebrows furrowed, and he feels the sudden irrational panic in his chest dissipate immediately. *It's only and expression*, he thinks to himself, pinching his nose against the oncoming headache, but he knows Eleven probably meant it literally.

She squeezes his fingers again, and he squeezes back. "We'll find him."

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He finishes his homework in a blur that night, hardly caring that it looks like his middle school self put the answers on the page. His English professor is probably going to give him hell, but Mike just tosses his essay onto his desk, and slips into bed. He can't focus at all.

Mike, Will's voice whispers in his ear, disapproving, *you know you shouldn't do that*. But Mike ignores it, and flips onto his other side, frowning.

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His English professor hands his paper back when he's leaving her lecture two days later, and she doesn't look like she expected anything other than the hectic scratches of red and the '72' marking the top of his paper. Mike folds it up neatly and stuffs it into the top of his book bag as he's walking out.

Hopper had called him the night before, sounding tired as he regaled Mike with his tale of failure. He looked here, he looked there, then he *thought* he found something but it was probably just your run-of-the-mill-bum, *and then and then and then*.

Mike slides to the kitchen floor just under the phone, cord brushing against the side of his face, and listens without interrupting. At some point Eleven comes in, looking comfortable in an old sweater, and she steps over Mike's legs to search the cabinets. She bats at a low hanging set of lights, twisting a couple when the bulbs flicker, and Mike sighs, barely listening to Hopper.

He grabs her ankle and she kicks him, but it's a solid acknowledgement. Hopper is still rambling on the other end of the line, and as much as Mike hates it--as absolutely *livid* as it makes him--it's relieving. The singular drop of glue in Mike's life.

Hopper may not have found anything, but he's crossing a hundred things off a list Mike doesn't have the time to make.

"Is she there?" Hopper asks, and Mike sits the phone against his chest.

He grabs Eleven's ankle again, almost tripping her, and she pulls back

the brownie she's just found on the top shelf like she's going to throw it at him. Mike tugs on her pant leg.

"The police are looking for you," he whispers.

She takes the phone from him, dropping the brownie on his chest as a trade. Mike lets it slide down into his hands.

"Stop hiding the snacks," she says, putting the phone against her ear.

He starts opening the wrapper on the brownie. "You should really take a nutrition class."

"No."

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On Friday after class, Mike walks straight back to his car, and drives straight home, not thinking about food at all. It's been a week since Will went missing, and it's all that's on his mind. He had a practice exam today in chemistry and he hates to think that his mind's been so absent that he probably failed it. He had been doing so good in chemistry.

He's jittery, hands shaking and skin flushed with the singular thought that's been plaguing him all night and all day.

Will was in the Upside Down for a week, and that was his limit.

He's older now, Mike thinks to himself, something quiet and placating. Anything to keep his heart from slamming against his ribs another second. He's older now, so surely that means he's smarter, more cunning. Right?

But after that thought all he can think of is the pictures Will used to draw, alien and dark, haunting his every waking moment.

Mike thinks maybe he's having a panic attack, but he makes it into his apartment without any fuss. Eleven isn't home yet, so that just leaves him pacing around the living room by his lonesome with his own thoughts.

Wherever Will is, he's stuck, and Mike has no arms or skills to his name to help out with that. The first problem, as always, is locating him. How did they find him when they were kids? It was Eleven who set the ball rolling, he remembers, pointing at a picture in Mike's room and flipping over a D&D game board. But Will was in the Upside Down, and she could see that. What if Will's just stuck in some house halfway across the state?

He needs her to check.

Eleven comes home after the longest two hours of Mike's life, and he hardly lets her get her shoes off before he drags her into the living room.

"I need you to see if you can find Will," he spits out.

She balks. "Mike--"

"I know you don't want to, El, but he--"

"Mike--"

--could be trapped in, in the *Upside Down*, or something, and I know *you* remember what happened last time, I mean you're the one who--"

"Mike," she says, so hard that it immediately shuts him up. She spins in his grip right before he pushes her onto the couch. Her face is flipping between emotions, shuttering and then opening into something vulnerable and worried, and then shuttering again. "I looked."

It's like being slapped in the face the way it feels, and he drops his hand from her shoulder, pulling away. "What?"

"I looked," she repeats, "when you left Saturday night." She's sounding the words out slowly, and he can tell from the look on her face that she's trying to find a way to break it to him carefully. Mike purses his lips.

Saturday night he had let his emotions get the best of him and stormed out of Joyce's house. No one had called, or brought it up.

They had probably expected Eleven to do it. Mike feels his knees wobbling, and lets himself fall onto the loveseat, but every inch of his skin is numb, and he can hardly tell it's even happened.

"What did you find?" He forces the words out, needing the answer.

Eleven looks at him for a long, long time, likely weighing the pros and cons of telling him. She stands in front of him, looking down, the bearer of bad news, harbinger of misfortune, and he is so, so scared. "Nothing."

He looks up at her, furrowing his eyebrows. "Nothing?" *Not even a body?*

She looks frustrated. "It's like I can't," she makes a motion at her head, fighting with the words, "access it. I couldn't find him." She drops her hand against her thigh. "I couldn't find anybody." She sighs, looking away from him. "I should've been practicing," she says. "I didn't think it would just go away."

It's unsettling, and Eleven definitely looks unsettled. She's aggravated, hand bouncing against her thigh and eyes narrowed.

"Do you think you'll be able to do it again?" he asks.

Eleven looks at him again, determined. "Yes," she says. Hope sparks in Mike's chest. "Square one."

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Three weeks pass, torturously slow. Mike thinks, on some level, he knows what it feels like to go insane. Everyone around him is acting normal, his friends are acting normal, *he* has to act normal, but inside he's a mess of anxiety, thoughts running a thousand miles a minute. When everyone isn't looking for Will or meeting to discuss what they haven't found, they're either dispersed to the winds or watching movies in the living room of the apartment.

It's break now, and they're traveling back to Hawkins for a brief visit before Christmas rolls around. Eleven is fiddling with the radio, or Mike assumes she is. Maybe it's just broken.

It stops on Africa, and the volume goes up just a fraction. Mike shakes his head, smiling.

They pass the old Hawkins Lab, and Mike scowls, trying to catch a glimpse of it. There's nothing he can see now but overgrown foliage and the old path going back into the woods. "I hate that place," he says, and finds that he really and truly does.

Eleven is still looking at it when Mike turns his eyes back to the road, and her expression is pure vitriol. He believes if she had the chance, if she really tried, she could destroy the entire facility. It's been empty since 1984. Maybe that's how they could practice strengthening her powers again.

Joyce is expecting both of them, so he stops inside and accepts the snack she offers. There's no coffee like there is at his house, and he thinks it's because she looks at him and sees another part of her household to take care of. A child who grew up with her son, forever twelve in her eyes.

She is, if nothing else, a physical reflection of Mike's inner turmoil. Mike's skin is regularly pallid and covered in a sheen of cold sweat, eyes bruised, hands shaky--all a lack of sleep. A college kid, he's sure people think when they see him. Joyce is much the same, but she hasn't taken the same pains to effect a look of normalcy, and she looks like she's been amped up on nothing but coffee and nerves for a month.

"Hey," she says when she opens the door, and her voice warbles. "Come in, come in!"

They do, and Mike's eyes flit about the room despite his attempts to look straight ahead. He knows what he's looking for, and he knows he won't find it. There are no drawings taped to the floor, no Christmas lights hung above the sofa, no sign of Will's absence anywhere in plain sight. There's a slight disarray to the place, almost unnoticeable, but Mike's spent half of his life running around the Byers' house, and he knows Joyce as well as his own mother.

There *are* Christmas lights strung about the living room, attached to the Christmas tree, but the way they claw across the walls belies their

purpose. Joyce glances at them as they walk into the kitchen, and Mike knows she doesn't have them up because she's enjoying the holidays. *Just in case*, her gaze says. *Just in case we missed something.*

He jumps, head swinging when he sees a line of lights flicker on and off, one by one down the hall, quick as lightning, but when he looks he sees it's just the extension cord hanging halfway out of the wall. His heart is pounding, and the flush of hope draining from his chest is so sudden it's painful. *Projecting*, he thinks, *I'm just projecting.*

"I just got home," Joyce says, flitting about the kitchen, "a bit before you two got here, so I didn't have time to make anything." She looks back at Mike and Eleven. "I hope you don't mind pizza."

"You didn't have to get anything," Mike says. Eleven is already opening the pizza box and pulling out a slice.

Joyce waves him off. Her hands shake as she pulls out a cigarette, and Mike pinches his lips, watching her. She looks back at him, breathing out a steady stream of smoke. Her eyes are rimmed pink.

"They found two of his books," she says, breaking the silence. Her words are carefully clipped, like she's doing her best to state facts rather than emotions. Mike feels something cold burst in his chest. "And a sketch pad."

"Who did?" he asks, curling his fingers into his palms. His hands are shaking almost as badly as Joyce's.

The state troopers, he expects her to say. They would know what to do, who to look for. But answers are sparse, and it's easy for the world to turn a blind eye to the problems of one boy.

She exhales a wall of white. "Some," she waves her hand around, trying to find the words, not caring enough for the fight, "missing persons people." Her eyes turn away from Mike. "They're scaling back the search teams."

"*What?*" It's not a question, it's a demand. Why would they scale back? He wants to say something in protest, but everything gets jumbled in his mouth, and the look on Joyce's face says it all--she's

not happy either.

“Hopper is looking,” Eleven says, looking at Joyce. A steady presence among them.

Joyce sighs, but nods. Mike knows if they weren’t there she would be an explosion of energy, misdirected without a funnel, but he almost worries she’s losing hope. Surrounded by people who go on with their lives, trying but not trying, aware of their predicament but making no real effort to life the burden from their shoulders.

He bites his tongue, and lets Eleven take control of the conversation.

-

Christmas passes, a dull grind of visiting relatives who drag Mike to visit other relatives who think it’s their God given duty to give their opinions and spit on his. By New Year’s he feels fat and slow from days of home cooked meals, and his head aches when he wakes up. He rolls onto his side, unwilling to get up. The day has hardly even begun.

His clock, which reads 12:37, begs to differ.

Forty four days. He draws an ‘x’ through the thirty first on his calendar, flipping it over to January. A full month. His chest aches when he looks at the fresh page, and he tosses his sharpie down on his desk, leaving his room.

-

Mike knows he’s running out of free time, and, despite everything Hopper tells him not to do, he gets in his car after work and drives.

He knows where he’s going, but at the same time he’s completely lost. There is somewhere to start, but no plan, no end. It’s what all the police are doing--the search teams--so it doesn’t bother him quite as much as he thinks it should when he fills up his tank and follows the familiar route to Will’s work.

The theater is bustling. It’s a Saturday, normal for everyone else in town, and there’s no sign of anything out of the ordinary. People park

their cars, walk into the building, laugh, smile, *ignore* . There are footprints worn into the pavement, invisible to the passersby, and Mike accelerates, intent on following them.

But as much as he likes to think he was good at tracking things as a child, he knows if he never found the two most important people in his life, there's no way he can do it now.

-

Spring semester rolls around, and passes. It's lost in a blur of numb studying, losing himself in his schoolwork and attending gatherings as a physical presence but little more. Every month that goes by takes a little bit more hope along with it. A lot more.

He feels a wall building between himself and the rest of the group, and thinks that maybe they invite him along because they pity the state he's in. They're worried what he gets up to alone. They're worried what he'll do.

Nothing. They worry for nothing, there's nothing he can do, he's stuck in the apartment with nothing, nothing, nothing but his grief to comfort him.

So he says nothing, and pretends almost as well as they used to.

Will was like the glue in their group, and Mike is beginning to think that maybe he wasn't holding the entire group together. He was only keeping them attached to Mike.

If Lucas had been short with him that day in November, there is no fuse left any longer. Mike's very presence seems to incense him just by being in the room, and his irritation bounces back off of Mike. It leaves a bad taste in everybody's mouth, and their arguments cut every party and get-together short, extending the wait for the next one even longer in fear that the both of them will begin to fight again. And, like clockwork, they do.

This time, though, this time Mike feels the fracture more than assumes it.

"It's not up to us, Mike!" Lucas snaps.

“You aren’t even trying!” Mike yells back, gameboard forgotten where it rests on the coffee table between the five of them. “You all stopped trying *months* ago--!”

“There’s a reason for that!”

Lucas stands up suddenly, and Mike stares at him from his spot on the floor. There is no worry, no sense of friendship in his eyes that Mike can see any longer. Mike looks at him and sees a rope, connecting them for years, growing taut, taut, tauter, and finally, Mike wrapping his fingers around his side and yanking just that much more. There’s no more give.

“There is nothing we can do,” Lucas breathes, a dangerous calm. Mike feels his hackles raising. Run, or fight? Leave the group, or convince them?

You can’t convince them, he thinks, sudden, a brand new light bulb in an unused basement. *It’s five months too late for that.*

“It’s been months, Mike,” he says, staring at Mike, hard. Mike can’t remember a time he didn’t look at him that way. “Will is a cold case. You need to accept that.”

Accept it

Accept it

Accept it

Mike is cold, and for one terrifying moment he feels the numbness wash over him. Everybody in the group is either looking at Mike, or avoiding eye contact with the both of them. Is that it then? Will Mike’s silenced protests be the last voice turning away from the boy that was Will Byers? *Maybe he should.*

And then the anger crashes down on top of him, the crest of the wave, and ocean of repressed emotion. “*You’re giving up?!*”

Lucas throws his hands up, like he was so close, and Mike just slipped from his grasp again. “We’re not giving up, Mike! You just don’t know when to stop!”

Mike vaults up from the floor. "There is no right time to stop! You act like Will hasn't been here since we were all kids! But at the first sign of a problem, you turn around and run! Forget Will, why would Will matter if you can save your own ass?!"

"This isn't just any old problem!" The way Lucas says it makes Mike think he may hit him at the slightest extra provocation, but he can't stop himself.

"Oh, yeah? What about last time then? You remember that? You decided you just wanted to stay at home, because why should the safety of the team matter?! But you came back at the end, so why can't you--!"

"Last time, last time, last time," Lucas mocks. "Last time was different, Mike! Last time was an entire *universe* of different! Will was in an alternate dimension, and we knew about it. We *knew*. We don't know *now*. All we know *now* is that Will hasn't been going to *class* for five months, he hasn't been sleeping in his *bed* for five months, and he hasn't been coming *home* for five months. He hasn't been doing a lot of things. And we don't know *anything* ." Lucas steps around the coffee table, poking Mike's chest. " *That* is the difference."

"That's why we *look for him!*" Mike yells through his teeth, shoving Lucas.

"No! No, we don't look! There's nothing to look for!" Lucas snaps forward again, pushing Mike back hard enough to send him sprawling onto the loveseat. "If the police can't find him, we can't either!"

"You just--!"

"Not me, Mike!" Lucas shouts, and there's so much finality in his tone, in the way he stands, that Mike stops fighting to get up. They stare at each other for a long time, and when Lucas breathes Mike can hear that rope between them straining under the pressure. "*Will is gone.*"

Mike swallows, curling his fingers into the fabric of the couch. "What if he's not? What then?" And it sounds like a plea. *Please, please don't*

give up on him. Give me a bit more of that rope and I promise I won't let you hang yourself with it. "What if you're giving up for nothing?"

"I'm not," Lucas chokes out, and Mike sees his throat work around the sound, but his face looks still as stone. He looks so sure of himself, but he's struggling so much.

Mike looks around at their party of five, and finds faces that are reluctant to meet his eyes, but he knows what he'll see if they do. Regret; sadness; tears from Dustin, who's hopeful to the end but practical as ever. Mike can see them dripping off the tip of his nose, and feels his throat close up.

Acceptance .

Mike stands up, brushing past Lucas.

"Mike--" Eleven reaches out, fingers grazing his wrist.

He shakes her off, spinning on her. *Don't do it, Mike, you know you'll regret it--* But he's always been at the beck and call of his emotions, and anger slides back up his throat, grip still fast on his tongue. "You're with them, then?"

She makes a sound, stuck between a rock and a hard place, and he laughs. It's the furthest thing from happy he's ever heard. "Have fun at your pity party."

-

On May 21st the police pull Will Byers out of a ditch.

2. Chapter 2

On day one hundred and ninety two since Will's final call Mike attends an open casket, and admits, in the safety of solidarity and silence, that maybe Will had been right to question his presence among the living.

He spends almost the entire duration of the event in one corner of the room, tucked away behind a wall of people and a plate of refreshments. No one speaks to him, and he's thankful. Joyce needs all the comfort she can get.

But almost isn't the same as all, and eventually the guests trickle away into the next room, leaving Mike alone with a coffin that should be empty. He stares at it from across the room for as long as he can, but eventually the cold seeps under his skin and he finds himself standing.

He looks like he's sleeping. A hundred people passed over the spot he's standing in, each saying the same sympathetic, placating words to Hopper and Joyce in steady repetition. Joyce was in no state to share the details of Will's death, but Mike doesn't need to hear them to know it was bad. There's too much makeup.

"We mourned you," he whispers. His skin color is all off, making him look so much healthier than Mike remembers. His cheeks are fuller. There are no bags under his eyes. *And now we have to do it again.*

There is another moment, long and empty, where Mike stares down at Will and feels nothing. And then he feels the softest push against the inside of his chest, a trickle of water, slowly becoming heavier and heavier, before all of his repressed emotions are dragging him under and choking him.

Mike covers his mouth with his hand to stifle a sob, squeezing his eyes shut. He should've picked Will up that day. It wasn't even a 10 minute drive, he should've gone, he *should've*. If he had, Will would still be alive.

"Mike."

He breathes in sharply, but it's only loud because of his running nose. Mike opens his eyes and rubs at them furiously, looking to the doorway.

Max stands just inside the threshold, hands cradling her elbows against her chest. Lucas is standing beside her, and two pairs of feet are following close behind him. She steps closer, voice lowered. "Why are you in here by yourself?"

For a brief moment all he wants to do is dredge up the intense dislike he harbored towards her when they were kids, the anger that's been brewing inside him since his last argument with Lucas, but staring at them all makes him realize that there's no reason for it, and pushing them away is going to solve nothing. He's extricated himself from the group due to his own bullheadedness, and now more than ever he wishes he could take his words and shove them back down his throat. He's not sure if they'll let him.

Eleven shuffles a bit toward the front, and Mike swallows thickly. The past six months are pressing up against the back of his throat, higher and higher, and Mike doesn't have the means to escape on his own. "I should've picked him up," he says, out loud this time, so softly he thinks it will get lost in the sound of the air conditioning and the babble of the crowd next door.

But it doesn't. Lucas finds his gaze, eyes red rimmed and cheeks wet. "Mike, you can't think like that," he says, and although it seems like it's been a while since he's cried, his voice is still warbling, nose stuffy.

"But I should've." He can feel himself crying again, and he reaches out to Dustin, clawing desperately at the back of his jacket when he crashes into Mike. Everyone piles forward, hugging in a mess of limbs, like if they squeeze hard enough it will stop the hurt. "If I had, he wouldn't," he breathes, almost a sob, "he wouldn't be--"

"Mike," Dustin says, cutting him off. His voice is a wreck, and he snuffles, long and wet, in between a sob. His face is right in front of Mike's. "You can't know that. You won't *ever* know that. You just," he hiccups, and Mike can feel himself start to sob sympathetically. "You can't, alright?" He reels Mike in again, and Mike buries his face in

Dustin's shoulder, feeling hands rubbing his back, patting. Eleven is leaning against his back, and Lucas' head is on his other shoulder. "It's not fair. We shouldn't have to do this."

It's the most words anyone manages, but Mike is thankful someone's managed anything at all. Without even realizing it Dustin is reminding Mike that they're all grieving, not just him, as much as he's deluded himself into thinking so. It's something he needs.

They stand together for a few minutes before the comfort becomes too much for Mike. He swallows the words, but they come right back up. "Can you guys forgive me?"

Dustin snorts, and Mike doesn't say anything about how wet his shoulder is. "You're so stupid, Mike."

And it sounds like a yes.

-

Dustin was right, of course. Mike is stupid. They do forgive him, and they give him hell in the process, Lucas especially. But Mike knows he deserves it, and he takes it in stride.

But, sitting among friends in a cemetery, he wishes, more than anything, that Lucas was the one admitting he was wrong.

-

"You love this movie," Mike says, picking a VHS out of the pile they've made on the living room floor. He flips it over and reads the summary on the back.

"What is it?" Will asks, glancing up briefly. He looks back down at the movie he holds, but discards it, picking up another in its place.

Mike holds it up. "The one with your mom in it."

Will immediately drops the movie in his hands. "It's not my mom!"

"But your know what I'm talking about!" Mike laughs, jerking the tape out of Will's reach.

“Obviously,” Will grumbles, but half of it sounds like a stifled laugh. He shifts his weight onto his knees and starts parting their VHS sea to shuffle towards Mike. “You call it that every time we watch it.”

Mike shifts away. “That’s because that’s what it is.”

“It has a name .”

“Yeah. ‘The movie with your mom in it’. Really, such an inventive title, props to the writer--”

“Mike, shut up .” Will starts moving faster, but he’s outwardly smiling now, and Mike grins. He tries to move back again, but his back hits the bookcase. “I swear, I’m going-- shit-- ”

Will, in his rush to get to Mike, rests all his weight on Stand By Me, and the movie slides on the carpet, sending him sprawling forward in a mess of limbs.

Mike’s back slams into cold metal, and he jerks awake with the scent of blood choking him, thick and hot and cloying. He rolls over, grabbing for his wastebasket in the dark, and his hand slams into the side of it, spilling paper all over the floor. He makes a mad grab for it again, and barely succeeds in jerking it to the side of the bed before he vomits into it. The dream is fading away quickly, and he tangles his fingers in it, trying to remember every detail. It had seemed so *real* .

But that isn’t how that memory had ended. Will had fallen into him, and both of them had almost had the bookcase knocked on top of them. And then the staring, and the awkward maneuvering, and the cleaning, and *then* the movie.

But the living room bookcase was made of wood. Mike spits into the trashcan, leaning his face onto his cool blankets, and takes a moment to breathe. And Will had accidentally given him a bloody nose, but it wasn’t *that* bad. Was it?

Mike closes his eyes, fingers curling around the lip of the wastebasket. It had been spring, bordering on summer, and Will was sweating but he still refused to take off the sweater Mike had gotten

him for Christmas. He had smiled so much when Mike had brought up that movie, too. And when he laughed--

Mike turns his face into the blankets, breathing deeply where his throat tries to tighten up on him. It's helping no one, least of all him, to dwell. But letting go is hard, and if his head decides to dredge up the past, who is he to tell it no?

-

Things go on.

Time passes, the slow turn of a dial, seconds to minutes to days to weeks. Mike wakes up and goes about his day, every day, working a job he hates with no pay off in sight. Summer is dragging its feet, and for the first time he wishes classes would start up again so he had something to fill the space.

He's used to coming home from shifts and burying himself in possibilities, in what if's, chasing footsteps. It's been 3 weeks--24 days, actually, Mike still counts. It's by accident, he tells himself, but he knows every time he crosses another box off his calendar in red instead of black that it's always been on purpose.

-

"Don't pay attention to them," Will says, voice soft, but deceptively strong. He smiles placidly at Mike from across the kitchen table, and Mike knows what he actually means is *'Don't look at them. I am all that matters to you in this singular moment'*.

Mike glances at Dustin and El, standing at the sink. They're speaking in hushed whispers, and when Will talks they look at him, voices cutting off. Mike feels the silence in the air around them, sharp and cold and unfriendly, and he shivers. Their eyes are a vice, pinning him in his chair and assessing every breath.

He wants to run.

He knows he can't.

His eyes don't linger on either of them, darting back to Will. Will's

hands are folded in front of him on the table, and he Mike feels like he's being taken apart piece by piece, thought by thought. Not feels-- knows.

"I want you to know you can trust me," Will says. He's still smiling.

Mike swallows, acutely aware of every nerve in his body: the chair digging into his spine; his fingers, restless in his lap; the drop of sweat following the curve of his neck just behind his ear. When the silence extends, Will inclines his head a fraction, raising his eyebrows. It's not an unkind expression, not quite, but it makes Mike's stomach churn anxiously. "Do you trust me?"

No, no, no, I don't, you know I can't, you know. But Mike swallows again, feels the eyes watching him, and says, almost inaudibly, "Yes."

Will's expression shifts ever so slightly, yet the change is instantaneous. He looks more at ease with the situation, more in control, and Mike almost feels relieved. He hates himself for it.

It's quiet. No one moves for the longest time, and Mike breathes, feeling out of focus. He thinks maybe this is what it feels like to pass out. His body doesn't feel quite right, fuzzy and uncomfortable.

Will's eyes lock on his again. "I won't let them hurt you."

Dustin steps towards him, and Mike's vision blacks out.

"I know it's you, Will."

There's a sigh, and the fingers peel away from Mike's eyes, leaving his vision uninhibited. "How did you know?"

"El's hanging out with Max today," Mike says. He shifts the grocery bags in his hands and carries them into the kitchen.

Will follows him. "I could've been Lucas."

"Has Lucas ever done that?"

Will stares at him, and starts to smile. Mike knows he's right, and Will knows Mike knows Will knows he's right. "Dustin?" He probably doesn't

mean for it to be a question, but that's what it ends up as.

Mike starts putting away the groceries, and turns his back on Will, trying to hide his smile. Infections , he thinks. "Maybe, but it still wouldn't work."

"Too loud?" Will guesses.

"Too loud."

"Sometimes you have to be loud to stay hidden."

Mike stops and looks behind him, furrowing his eyebrows. "What was that?"

Will is sitting in his chair at the table, folding a napkin into an origami shape Mike can't discern yet. He creases it with the back of his thumb nail, looking up at Mike curiously. "What was what?"

"What you just said."

"What part of it?"

"'Sometimes you have to be loud to stay hidden'." He turns around fully, walking closer. "What was that?"

"Oh," Will's fingers are gentle where they cup the napkin, and Mike can see the general shape of a frog coming through. He's sheepish all of a sudden, and his eyes roam the room, anywhere but Mike. His fingers bend the napkin into the form of thin, delicate legs. "I don't know, I just," he shrugs, "I don't know."

Which roughly translates into, ' I just kind of said it in the moment because it made sense, but now that you're pointing it out I wish I hadn't'.

Something tickles at the back of Mike's head, and he wonders if maybe he's overlooking something important. He stares at Will, who's looking directly back at him, and tries to parse through his thoughts. What is he missing?

What has to stay hidden?

Will's eyes glitter, almost a different person, searching for something in his face.

But there is nothing to hide, and Mike discards the line of thought almost as quickly as it arrives. "Hey," he says, sitting a comforting hand on Will's shoulder. "Don't worry about it. It just sounded really poetic. I thought it might be a quote or something."

The look in Will's eyes is gone, but his hands are tense around the origami frog now, and Mike notices he's accidentally torn one of the legs off.

He's smiling when Mike meets his eye again, and it's shy and maybe a little pleased. "You think?"

-

The next morning, Mike gets rid of the third kitchen chair.

-

School slips back into his life, unceremonious and unimportant, and Mike focuses all his attention on his schoolwork. It's an immediate change from the way things were his last two semesters, barely turning things in on time and passing by the skin of his teeth. The party splits, meeting on weekends when they can, but otherwise they rarely see each other. There's a wall separating them anymore. Mike thinks it's Will's ghost, sitting heavy at their heels and refusing to be forgotten.

It makes it hard to traverse the apartment. Especially alone. But when the party avoids a problem, El goes too, and when Mike doesn't he's left relying on his ability to ignore the world surrounding him.

Sometimes, though, walking down the hallway back to his room, he hesitates by Will's door. It's nothing new, nothing he's never done before. When Will first disappeared Mike would sometimes wander inside and fiddle with Will's belongings, running his finger along the edge of old drawings, and hope that he would be OK.

Looking at his closed door makes his eyes prickle with heat, so he studiously faces forward.

Something crashes behind Will's door, and Mike jumps, slamming his shoulder into the opposite wall. There's a jumbled noise, and a loud scratch, and Mike holds his shoulder, staring. He's not sure if he's curious or terrified--

"--see I'm not so tough, just because I'm in lo-- wi-- uptown girl!"

The record scratches again, skipping words, and Mike's eyebrows draw together. He reaches forward slowly, pushing the door open. Someone wouldn't break in, would they? They're on the third floor. And to be stupid enough to make so much noise.

But there's no one in the room when he opens the door, and he lets it swing all the way open.

The record player beside Will's bed is merrily spinning away, filling the room with music. The song's stopped skipping, and Mike walks a bit closer, inspecting something he knows he won't figure out. He just wants to step in the room again. That's not such a bad thing to have to admit.

It's still the same way Will left it, all those months ago. Papers strewn about the room where he ran around in a flurry of panic, trying to nab all his textbooks and sketch pads for class, clothes all over the bed. He was always so bad at getting up on time.

"She's been living in her white bread world

As long as anyone with hot blood can

And now she's looking for a downtown man

That's what I am."

Mike finds himself smiling a bit, and stares down at the record player, turning and turning and turning. "Of all the songs to be listening to," he mumbles, but it's gentle and tender.

I miss you, he wants to say to the empty room, but he's too afraid of the tears to admit it.

The party meets up again early on in the semester after a painful amount of maneuvering dates and work schedules. It's nothing grand--just a relaxed get together in Mike and El's apartment. With food and drinks, of course.

Dustin makes a face at the movie Max holds up. "I don't know if a horror movie is a good idea..."

"What you're saying is," Lucas says, turning to him, "you're gonna pee your pants the first time someone pulls out a butter knife."

"That's not true!"

The both of them devolve into arguing, and Max stands in front of the TV, holding the movie against her stomach. Mike stares at it, trying to decide what side he wants to be on. He finds he doesn't really care, and when Max looks at him, he makes a noncommittal noise and shrugs.

She smiles at him, nodding. "You're real helpful, you know that?"

"Thanks, you're not the first person to say that."

"Big surprise." He laughs quietly, and she looks to Eleven, shaking the box. "What's the verdict?"

Eleven looks at the movie, and a beat passes before she says, "I want to watch it."

Dustin stops yelling at Lucas, whipping his head around. His hat tilts. "Hey!" He looks at Mike. "Mike, do something!"

Mike holds up his hand from where he's leaning back on the sofa. "What do you want me to do? Even if I vote no, that's two against three. You lost, Dustin."

"Yeah, but if you vote no, and--" he abruptly cuts the sentence short, mouth closing around the words.

No one in the room moves, but the air is charged, and Mike looks away. He pinches his lips, doing everything he can not to look like it's affecting him. Will is everywhere. He's left his fingerprints on

everything he loved, and no one can see them until it's a crime scene.

Dustin is staring at the floor and biting his lip, but Mike can see it trembling, and he knows if someone doesn't do something Dustin's going to cry. He looks more regretful than Mike's ever seen him.

"Dustin," Lucas says, voice soft and cautious.

"Just put in the movie," Dustin grits out.

"But you just said--"

"Just put it in!"

Lucas holds up his hands, and Max looks like she wants to say something, but refrains. She puts the movie in and squeezes herself onto the loveseat on Lucas' other side, forcing Lucas halfway into Dustin's lap. Eleven sits in the sofa with Mike, both of them touching shoulder to knee and yet somehow managing to stay completely withdrawn from each other.

Dustin hates the movie, like they all knew he would. He jumps when the protagonist sees things, and at every sudden loud noise or anxiety ratcheting moment. It makes Mike's skin tingle with anticipation.

A long period passes where nothing shows up, no one dies, nothing bad happens. Mike's attention is locked on the screen, waiting on bated breath. His body is tensed in preparation, and he can feel everyone else in the room waiting with him.

Fingers curl around his shoulder, and lips dip close to his ear.

"Mike."

He screams. He screams and he jumps and he throws himself off of the sofa. Lucas jerks away from him, eyes following him where he dances around the room, and Dustin screams with him, shocked into terror.

"That's not funny!" Dustin shouts. He rubs his arms, bouncing a bit, and shivers.

“Who did--!?” Mike starts, hands cupping his shoulder. His nerves are on fire and it makes his skin crawl. But when he looks around the room he sees four sets of confused eyes looking back at him.

I'm losing my mind, he thinks, and drags himself back to the sofa.

“You OK, man?” Lucas asks.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m,” he swallows, takes a deep breath to pull himself back together, “fine. Dustin’s just freaking me out a little.”

“Well sorry!” Dustin snaps, looking more freaked out than Mike’s ever felt in his life. “Just because I can’t handle the horror genre like the rest of you--!”

“Man, you literally fought the Demogorgon *and* the Demadogs, *and* you kept one as a pet!” Lucas says, incredulous.

“That’s different!”

“How?!”

Mike watches them as he sits down, breathing deeply, and tries not to focus on how familiar that touch had felt.

-

A couple more weeks pass, a lot more party gatherings pass, and Mike thinks he’s getting better. Probably. Maybe. The strain from before isn’t quite as present when they’re all together, as if they’re all putting in enough extra effort to cover the empty space.

He’s comfortable enough with his class schedule for the semester to not get lost and not forget what time to be in, and he thinks he’s found where he sits with each subject well enough. He finds he doesn’t have to immerse himself in his work as much as before with the group meeting so much. It’s a weight off his shoulders. Smiling comes easier. There’s a comfort for the hurt.

But sometimes his sleep is plagued with odd dreams--not quite nightmares. Mike wants to classify them as night terrors, but he doesn’t know if he can. They don’t make any sense to him. It’s the

vividness of them that bothers him, and they're only getting worse as time passes.

He finishes up a take home quiz for his Quantum Physics class and slips it back into a folder, done with his homework for the night. It's dark outside, and El should be heading home from Max's soon. He could probably call her and have her pick something up.

Mike slings his book bag over his shoulder, resigning himself to a night of noodles. If he's lucky there may be some chips in the cabinet. Dustin *probably* didn't eat all the dip when he was over last--

"Mike."

Mike stops just past Will's door, and the heavy thud of his footstep sounds extraordinarily loud in the empty apartment. His heart is slamming in his chest, and a slimy, uncomfortable feeling slithers up the back of his neck.

That door was closed.

He can't move, he has to. He has to know what's in there, it's a terrible, burning curiosity that locks down on all his thoughts and takes control of his limbs.

Mike takes one step back, both feet next to each other; two steps back; three steps back, both feet next to each other. He stares at his door down the hall, palms sweating. *Maybe I shouldn't.*

He looks up.

"Mike."

Will takes a step toward him, and Mike grabs the door and slams it shut. He doesn't think twice about the noise he's making, about the complaints he's sure to get with his bookbag dropping and his feet thumping on the ground as he runs back to the kitchen. His brain is following a straight line, and it is shouting *away*.

That's Will, that was Will, that was him, he was in his room.

"Holy shit," Mike mutters, grabbing his coat and throwing it on as he

stumbles out of the living room. He fumbles with his keys when he grabs them off the ring by the front door and curses his shaking fingers.

He drops his keys twice when he tries to unlock his car, and when he's finally behind the wheel he realizes he can't just *leave*. All his books and homework are in there, in the hallway, right in front of Will's door, and Mike doesn't want to skip class tomorrow just because he got scared of some, some--

So he drives to pick up something to eat with the change he loots from the console, and steaks out in his car until Max and Lucas bring El home.

And if Will's door is cracked when Mike picks up his book bag off the floor, he doesn't pay it any mind.

-

"Where are you going?"

Eleven stops, looking at Mike from across the table. She's got a duffle bag slung over her shoulder, only half filled. One night with Max.

She can tell that he knows where she's going, so she only stares at him, waiting for a response. Mike tries to find a subtle way of saying he's afraid of their home, but under Eleven's impatient gaze he finds nothing is coming to mind.

"I'm coming."

And, somehow, they end up having a full party sleepover. Max's house is unequipped for such a large gathering of people, and nobody else wants to both their families on such short notice with the surprise of all their childhood friends. Nobody but Mike.

"It's a shame Holly's not here," Karen says, leading Mike around the kitchen to the snacks she's made them against their will. "She would've loved to see you. You're hardly ever here."

He doubts that, but doesn't say as much. "It's a long drive. Where is she?"

“Visiting a friend.” Karen turns back around, handing him a plate of sandwiches cut into triangles.

Mike takes them, and glances to the side, feeling somewhat ashamed. “Sorry I dropped all this on you all of a sudden.”

Karen clicks her tongue in the same sympathetic way she’s done all her life, and Mike feels like he’s a child again, waiting to be comforted. “It’s no problem, sweetie. You know I always liked your friends.”

He raises his eyebrows.

She stares back at him, trying to be convincing, but laughs quietly after a few seconds of silence. A few cookies are placed along the edge of the sandwich plate, and she turns around to wipe down the counter. “Well, you’re all older now, and there’s a lot less spills on my carpet that I have to worry about.”

It’s clearly a joke, and Mike snorts, thanking her.

Max complains on multiple occasions about how it was supposed to be a “girls only” event, but there’s no heat in it, and later into the night she seems to genuinely enjoy everyone’s company. Two movies in people start drifting off, one by one, and while Mike’s falling asleep he realizes how long it’s been since he’s appreciated being back under that roof.

Mike unfolds the flap of the box sitting on their new kitchen table. Will, apparently thinking ahead, had written his name on all of his boxes, and labelled the contents. Mike and Eleven had not. They’d just have to suffer through the night looking for toothbrushes while Will was cozy in his bed with his linens and pj’s.

Mike digs through the box of clothes, but he pulls out a bra and sighs, closing it again. “Have you seen my clothes?!” he calls.

“Can you--” a grunt, and something that sounds like glass hitting the wall as he closes the door, “--try to be a little more specific?” Will asks from the room over. Mike thinks they may make that the living room. There needs to be space for the six of them when they’re all together.

"My clothes," Mike says again, walking into the living room.

Will sets a box against the wall, and slides down to the floor. He stares at Mike from across the room. His face is shiny with sweat. "You have a lot of clothes, Mike."

"I don't have that many!" Mike snips, defensive for a reason he himself doesn't even know. Will nods, looking like he's preparing himself for the rant that's sure to come, and starts to open the box next to him just to have something to do with his hands. "You know who has a lot of clothes? Nancy. Girls just do, I guess. They're always shopping and stuff in the movies, but, like,, El never had that much. But you know who had even more than Nancy? Steve. I mean, have you seen--"

Will holds up a pair of boxers, and Mike snaps his teeth together so fast he feels the shock in his temples. Heat travels up his neck, making his skin tingle unpleasantly.

Will smiles. "Are these the clothes you were looking for?"

Mike gives him a second, but Will only smiles more. He knows exactly what he's doing.

"I'm gonna kill you!"

He throws the underwear back in the box, darting away from the wall, but the threat doesn't stop his laughter. Will's shoes are struggling to make purchase on the carpet, sending him sprawling more than once, but he manages to stand next to a package of kitchenware (It's not mine, he thinks idly), and navigates their columns of boxes with more grace than Mike can muster on a good day.

But Mike's not wearing shoes, and Will's sneakers are so worn out they've lost their traction. Will barely makes it around the corner to the hallway before he's sent sliding sideways, only just managing to catch himself on the wall.

Mike wraps his arm around Will's neck, knuckles on his head. "Yield!"

"I yield, I yield!" Will yells, frenzied. His hands hold onto Mike's forearm like it's life or death, but he's still hiccuping with laughter.

Mike lets him go, and Will laughs a little more, brushing closer than he needs to on his way back into the living room. They both know Mike wouldn't have done anything, threat or no.

Mike touches his arm where Will brushed it, feeling it tingle curiously all the way up to his spine. He pulls his sleeve up, checking for a bruise, or a welt, maybe, but finds nothing.

"My record player!"

"Is it broken?" he asks, frantic. He knew he shouldn't have been driving like that with all their stuff in the car, but he just loved that song by Rick Springfield--

Will pulls it out of the box and sits it on the ground. "No, I just like seeing it." He shuffles through his records, barely glancing at the cover of each before passing by it.

"You scared me, Will," he chides, walking closer.

Will only smiles up at him. He does a double take, and looks through his records quicker. "Dance with me!"

Some of that flush from earlier colors the tips of Mike's ears. "What?"

"Dance with me!"

"No, you don't have to say it again, I heard you," he says, shaking his head. Will stops parsing through his records, "I can't dance."

"You can dance, I've seen you dance."

The flush is definitely back. "I'm never inviting you over again."

"You should've thought about that before you gave me a key to our apartment." He holds up a record, and Mike's eyes immediately lock onto "The Proclaimers" written across the cover.

They both stare at each other, and Mike knows what's happening before it's even happened. "Don't--"

"When I wake up," Will sings, loud and unabashed, holding eye contact.

“Will, please--”

“Well, I know I’m gonna be, I’m gonna be the man who wakes up next to you--”

“Will, stop,” Mike says again, but it’s almost impossible to understand behind his laughter. Will’s accent is awful, and it’s only making the song worse. “I’m not dancing to that.”

Will looks at the record like it’s failed him, and sits it aside with a contemplative noise. Mike leans against the wall, more open to the prospect of dancing than before, only if just a little.

Will holds up a record after a few seconds, and Mike furrows his eyebrows. “Berlin?” Like--

“You remember at the Snow Ball? When this played?” Will asks, sliding the record out.

Mike feels his palms sweating. “Whatever it is, it probably played at like twenty.”

“OK,” Will says, snorting a bit as he stands up. The song starts playing, and Mike wants to say he had no idea what was going to come out of those speakers, but that wouldn’t be the truth, and Will wants his denial less than he wants his lies. “Then I want you to remember all twenty of the times you danced at all twenty of the Snow Balls you went to.”

He holds out his hands, and Mike’s throat feels dry. It’s anxiety, he thinks, but somehow that feels like a lie, too. “All twenty?”

“All twenty.”

Don’t get cold feet, Wheeler, you can dance to those stupid Scottish guys after this, he tells himself, and steps into Will’s arms.

Will, who was looking like he was two steps from taking the record off and calling it a night, grins at Mike. The dance feels more like waddling than it normally does when they’re both trying to avoid knocking over boxes, and the record player is on the floor so the sound gets cut off, but it’s nice. Mike’s stomach flutters pleasantly, and when he accidentally steps on Will’s pinky toe or trips on the edge of the coffee table, it feels less

like he's trying to impress someone and more like his company is being enjoyed.

"Not too old to dance with your best friend?" Will asks, sliding closer to Mike so he doesn't knock over a stack of toiletries.

"Did I ever give you the impression that I was?" Mike jokes, fingers toying absentmindedly with the back of Will's shirt.

But Will isn't smiling. He looks contemplative, if not a bit wistful. They've both been speaking quietly with no space between them, but Will's almost whispering, like what he's about to say could have a huge impact. "You make it hard, sometimes."

Mike stares at him again, confused, and the quality of light above them sharpens into something bright and a little too white to be in their living room. They'll have to turn a lamp on, instead. "To dance with?"

"No, to," Will digs his fingers into Mike's shoulders, blunt fingernails breaking the skin around his collar, "help."

"What?" Mike asks, eyes wide. Every good feeling in his body drains away, leaving Mike dizzy with the change. "Will, that doesn't make sense."

They both keep spinning, dancing to a song Mike no longer feels like dancing to, with a partner he no longer feels comforted by. Will keeps staring at him, expression fluctuating between placid and horrified. Mike tries to grapple with the back of his shirt, to pull Will off, but his fingers won't move.

"Will, I don't--" He shakes his head, looking at Will. "What do you need help with?"

The light flickers, and Will's fingers dig rivets into Mike's neck.

"Wake up."

Mike wakes up gasping, but the room is still dark, and no one else seems bothered by his nightmare. He tries to settle, doesn't want to risk stepping on a stray arm or leg if he gets up to watch TV or get a drink, but when he runs his fingers over the back of his neck, he

swears it feels tender.

-

The dreams stick with him for days, and Mike runs each and every one through his head, trying to understand. They're memories, twisted and dark. Mike fears going to sleep at night, and every time he lays his head down on his pillow his body feels tense and clammy. His mind runs and runs and runs, trying to lock onto a good memory or a scenario to play out, but anxiety taps at his shoulder, patient and ready to wait for the moment he lets his guard down.

Sometimes he sleeps normally, but as September turns into November the dreams become more frequent. It's small things--a light flickering or changing color, Will's hands clawing or ripping at things he holds, his face distorting, scenery or walls twisting and blurring, Will walking into memories he was never a part of.

I've never dreamt like this before, Mike thinks one night, waking up in a sweat. *Will's death is messing me up.*

He gets out of bed, walking down the hall to the kitchen to get a glass of water. There's nothing abnormal about Will's room. It's quiet, it's dark, the door is shut. Mike tiptoes past anyway. He doesn't try to excuse the action to himself.

He means to stay in the kitchen for a while, but the room is open and dark, and he shivers, feeling uncomfortable. Like something is watching him. He knows it's an unfounded fear, but he carries his glass of water back to his room.

Something drops, loud enough to make Mike jump and send water spilling all down his arm.

"--ear it i--the night"

The record scratches--badly--jumping, Mike's sure, from where it's fallen. He's paralyzed, breathing hitched, body cold all over again.

And then he's *furious* .

"I hear the secrets that you keep"

When you're talking in your sleep"

For a second, it doesn't matter that Will's dead. He's frustrated, out of his mind with the lack of sleep, the torment of seeing his friend over and over again in the worst circumstances possible.

"Why won't you leave me *alone?!"*

He opens the door, yelling into the empty room.

But the room isn't empty. Will is standing by the record player, hands hovering over it, and he turns to look at Mike like he's been caught red-handed. Mike supposes, in some weird, roundabout way, he has.

"*Mike,*" Will says, turning toward him. He steps forward, and Mike steps back. He may be angry, but his fear is toiling just beneath the surface, and if Will makes one wrong move, he knows he'll bolt.

"Why are you doing this?" he asks, not meaning for it to sound as harsh as it does. "I've never done anything bad to you. *Ever,*" he says, and he feels his throat close up. His breath hitches on a sob, and he tries his best not to cry. "So why can't you just let me mourn you in peace?"

"*Mike,*" Will says again. *Is that all he can say?* But then Will shuffles forward again, expression twisted in terror, "*Help me.*"

It's horrifying, but somehow so, so sad, and Mike feels himself backing up to the wall. His chest hurts with all the emotions running through him. He wants to, he does, he *does* , but he *can't* . "You're *dead,*" he finally chokes out.

Will shakes his head. "*No, I'm not. I'm stuck--"*

"*You are,*" Mike hisses, desperate for the conversation to end. "We mourned you, we went to your funeral, we saw your body, we put you in the *ground* , we--"

"*It wasn't me!"* Will shouts, and the sound bounces around the room and into the hallway, sounding like it continues on forever, echoing back at them. "*It wasn't me, I'm still alive, Mike, you have to help me, it's the--!"*"

The sentence is aborted, and Will looks behind him at the wall, body going rigid. Mike notices, in his shock, that Will doesn't look like the ghosts he's seen on TV. He looks like he's in the room with Mike, but if Mike blinks or jerks his head too fast he swears there's no one there at all.

"Mike?" Eleven says, setting her hand on his shoulder.

He jumps, and knocks his head against the wall. She's staring at him, worried and looking sleep mused, and he feels sorry but somehow irritated. "What took you so long?"

She wrinkles her nose at him, narrowing her eyes. "Why did I need to be awake?"

Mike looks back at the record player, but the room is empty, filled only by the soft beat of The Romantics. "The record player turned on by itself," he mumbles, crossing the room to shut it off.

-

"Do you think Will is haunting us?" Mike asks one night, laying on his living room floor at two in the morning. He's too afraid to ask it under the scrutiny of sunlight, and he doesn't want to see anyone's reactions to it.

But, unable to see anyone, he locks onto the way everyone's breath hitches. It is still.

"Why would he haunt us?" Lucas asks, but Mike knows what that sentence feels like in his mouth, and it tastes like disquiet.

There's a general murmur of concurring, and Mike lets his body relax onto the floor. That means nobody else is being bothered by Will's ghost. But that makes Mike feel like the odd one out, like maybe he really *is* going crazy. For some reason Will's decided to latch onto him in the afterlife.

He said he wasn't dead, a small, hopeful part of him whispers. He's latched onto the idea since it was presented to him, but he has no clue what to do with it, who to tell, where to go. Will only said he was *alive*, not how to *get to him*.

It's frustrating, and stealing Mike's concentration from where it should be. It's all turning right back into the previous year. He can feel his grades slipping through his fingers.

"Why are you asking?" Dustin asks, somewhere across the room.

Mike doesn't know what to say to that. He can feel Eleven's focus zoning in on him, and he knows she's remembering the record player. "I just...get a feeling, sometimes," he says stupidly. "That he's still around."

"You get a feeling," Lucas says.

The conversation is quickly heading to a place he doesn't want it to go, and Mike huffs, rolling over. "Just drop it."

Blessedly, he does, and Mike falls asleep smashed between Lucas and Eleven.

-

Mike comes back to the apartment after what could be argued as one of the worst days of his scholarly career, and maybe his life, only to have the icing on the cake sitting right in his parking spot.

He knocks on the guy's window, and glares when he gets an unconcerned look in return. The guy rolls his window down and Mike backs up, waving his hand to dispel the smoke. "Can I help ya?"

"Uh, yeah, can you read?" Mike asks, pointing at his apartment number on the assigned parking tag.

"I don't live here," the man says, tipping his head down so he can see Mike over the top of his shades. "I'm just waiting for my girlfriend."

"Oh, wow, that makes it all OK, then!" Mike throws his hands up. "I don't care if you're waiting for the president! Move your car!"

"OK, OK," the man says, laughing. He starts his car, and Mike makes a noise of disgust when he revs the engine.

Mike parks his car in *his* allotted space, ignoring the guy's jeering

comments from where he parked in the spot right next to Mike. He hopes the guy's car breaks down halfway to wherever he's going.

He throws his book bag up into the air once he's in the kitchen, revelling in the way it makes the table shake when it falls, and throws his hands up. "Retaking fucking english," he snaps into the empty kitchen. "Least understanding professor in the history of fucking college professors!"

He opens the fridge, snatching out a package of cheese and some lunch meat. "Oh, why, Mr. Wheeler," he mocks, throwing it all together into a poorly made sandwich, "your best friend went missing while you were taking my class? And that's why your grades suddenly slipped off the face of the earth? Life's a bitch like that, huh?"

He accidentally smashes the bread when he puts the slice on the top, but he doesn't care. "I'd like to see how she would act if her best friend was pulled out of a fucking ditch." He starts putting everything up. "Stupid," he slams the refrigerator shut, "fucking--"

The kitchen lights dim slowly, and Mike looks up, watching them all brighten again. He thinks maybe there's a problem with the electric, but it happens again, only to the Christmas lights.

The plug pops out of the wall, and Mike jumps, watching it smack the plaster once, twice, then swing.

Every light in the kitchen brightens so much that the bulbs blow, and Mike runs.

-

"How can you sleep there?" he asks Eleven the next time they meet to stay with the party.

Dustin's mom is letting everyone camp out in her living room, and they've all brought sleeping bags and pillows and extra blankets. It's like they're kids again. Mike's not sure they ever really grew up.

She furrows her eyebrows. "Are you OK, Mike?"

“Well, yeah,” he lies, immediate. He doesn’t want her to know about the things he’s been seeing, the sounds, the touches. The lightbulbs he had to buy, “of course, everything’s fine--”

She frowns at him, and he doesn’t even have to hear the words to know he’s in trouble. He’s never been a convincing liar.

So he just sighs, and shrugs, and doesn’t say much of anything.

Eleven looks at him for another moment, and shifts her feet in her sleeping bag. “Do you really think Will is haunting us?”

It sounds awful when she says it, and he flushes, embarrassed. But it’s the truth, and he *knows* the things that have been happening are real, and not just his imagination. “Maybe just me.”

She folds her hands in her lap, and stares at them, thinking. “Maybe...it’s just because all his stuff is there?” she asks.

It makes sense. If all of his belongings were still with Joyce, he would probably stay there. Mike nods. “Should we,” he trails off, not quite liking his own train of thought. “Should we move his things?”

“Is he bothering you?” she asks.

Yes, God yes, I can’t even sleep at night without seeing his face. Mike runs his fingers through his hair, briefly scratching at his scalp to give himself some time. “Just a little,” he whispers, hoping no one hears him.

She waits. “Do you want to get rid of it?”

Mike takes even longer to answer. “No.” And he finds that, for some odd reason, it’s true.

-

He is accompanied on almost every trip back to the apartment by Eleven, and as if sleeping normally isn’t difficult enough, it’s a chore to get it done at all in his own room. She lets him sleep curled up in her bed, and something about it is simple and familiar. When the light in her room flickers, she shuts it off, and Mike feels at ease, in

the dark with someone else in the room.

He spends his time on campus in the library, or doing his homework wherever he picks up food or coffee. There's a first for everything, even his grades. It feels good.

Mike and Eleven decide to bake on a Friday. Something simple and small, just a treat for Joyce and Hopper, who they haven't seen since the semester started again. Everyone's always busy, busy, busy, but somehow they've managed to get ahold of Hopper, and it's a surprise for Joyce.

One son in New York and the other six feet under, Mike thinks, carrying their cake up to the house. Eleven is already on the porch opening the door, gaze focused on the lock. *She must be lonely.*

The Christmas lights are up, but only on the tree this time. Mike tries not to think about that too much.

Joyce is excited, hands gesturing and covering her mouth and hovering in the air. She jumps off the couch, running over to hug them both. She looks good. Better.

"Jane, you never come home," Joyce chides, a mother to the end. She runs her hands over Eleven's hair, and it sticks out around her fingers, curly and mussed. Eleven just smiles, but Mike knows that look. She's happy. "We'll have to get you your license."

"And what car?" Hopper laughs, coming around Joyce to hug them both.

Joyce clicks her tongue, walking over to Mike with her arms open. He smiles and hugs her. "We'll figure something out," she says. She looks at Mike, and does the same thing she's just done to Eleven. Mike can feel his hair getting smashed into a new shape. "You need to come over more, too." She turns around and walks into the kitchen. "I never see anyone anymore."

"--maybe do that," Hopper says.

Eleven stares up at him. "I'm not stealing a car."

Mike follows Joyce into the kitchen, sitting their cake on the counter, and takes his coat off.

“I should’ve known something was going on,” Joyce says, closing the oven. “Jim? Cooking something that’s *not* a TV dinner?” She scoffs, but it looks fond. She slaps her oven mitt onto the counter, looking at Mike. “I *would* like to see you all more. *All* of you.” She frowns. “Where are Dustin and Lucas and Max?”

“I don’t know,” Mike says, and it’s true. They had just sort of planned this spur of the moment. “El wanted to visit, so it’s just us. I didn’t even think about it.”

Joyce nods, accepting. “You’ll all have to come over for Christmas, or something,” she says, and as she turns away, Mike can see her eyes start to water. Her voice is shaking. “This house is so empty.”

Mike swallows. He doesn’t know what to do, or say, so he just stands, staring at his feet as he nudges the old kitchen tile. It’s stained with crayon scratches, and it only makes him feel worse. Mike lives in a place where Will is hidden behind a door, but Joyce comes home and Will is embedded in the walls.

“We’re going to have fun!” she says suddenly, and he’s not sure if she’s trying to convince him or herself. She’s made her mind up, whichever it is. “So let them know they’re coming.” She turns to look at him, tongs in hand. “That’s not an option. I’m expecting them.”

Mike laughs, and at first it sounds strained with lingering emotions. He holds up his hands. “OK, I’ll tell them when I see them next.”

They talk for a little while longer, and Mike excuses himself to go to the bathroom, but he stops in the middle of the hallway, looking at Will’s closed door. He drops the doorknob, and crosses the hallway, looking back down to see if anyone is coming his way. He opens the door.

It’s empty. Will’s bed is there, mattress old as ever, sunk in the middle, but all made up in his old sheets. A few of his posters are still up, a lot of old drawings that draw Mike back to every year of his childhood, sitting at Joyce’s kitchen table and coloring. Some of them

are Mike's.

There's little else there besides boxes taped up and full of old toys or stacks upon stacks of drawings that will only be pulled out every other decade. The tape on the box of drawings looks like it's been torn open and half-heartedly patted down, and it makes Mike's chest hurt.

As empty as the room is compared to Will's room at their apartment, Mike can see years worth of history in every nook, in each piece of paper lining the walls, and he thinks maybe a part of him believes that Will isn't really haunting him at all.

-

Eventually going home was going to leave him without company, and when Mike slips back into their apartment after class one day, he's not surprised to hear music playing softly. It's completely different than what he was expecting, like this time the words aren't being directed at him. They don't sound like they were being played for him at all.

Mike sets his things on the table, shuffling down the hallway on the balls of his feet.

"That's where you want to go to get away from it all

Bodies in the sand, tropical drink melting in your hand

We'll be falling in love to the rhythm of a steel drum band"

Mike pushes the door open, still feeling the back of his neck tingle unpleasantly with jitters, but he knows what he'll see now. It's been over a week since he was in there last.

The record is spinning away--Mike doesn't think he's ever been afraid of The Beach Boys, but the room is untouched, and he's getting nervous the longer nothing happens. Will is nowhere to be seen.

Mike walks inside, looking around. The curtains flutter with movement, and he jumps, standing still as he waits. Nothing jumps out at him, grabs him. When he tries to turn the lights on, they

flicker, but stay off.

“Mike?” He hears, soft and distorted.

He wants to throw something and run, but he forces himself to walk around the bed.

Sitting on the floor, against the dresser, is Will. He looks exhausted, and beat to all hell. His eyes are rimmed red and bloodshot, purple as bruises underneath, and the way he lays belies extreme fatigue. Mike doesn't know what to do.

“You're alive,” he says, a statement meant to be a question.

Will stares up at him, breathes, and, *“I'm alive.”*

Mike drops to the ground, inching toward him. He's never felt such frenetic desperation. *“Tell me where to find you.”*

He tries to take Will's hand, but it passes through nothing. Will looks at him, and a slow smile spreads out on his face, chased by hopeless laughter. He's crying. *“It's,”* he shakes his head, trying to find the words. He's just as desperate, *“it's like a hospital,”* he says. *“But there's no one here.”*

Like a hospital? Mike thinks, running through all the places in his head. That could be anywhere. There's one place in particular that sticks out, but--

“They hardly ever let me see, but,” Will says, stealing Mike's attention, *“Do you remember the lab?”*

-

“Mike,” Eleven says when she comes through the door. She sets her things down on the table.

Mike is in a flurry, collecting things he may need. He's going to need to be unrecognizable, at least at first glance, and he'll need clothes for Will. Just in case. Everything else can wait. How will he get inside, though? And what if he's stopped?

He drops his duffle on the table, turning around and scanning the counters. "What's up?"

She watches him, confused, but shakes it off quickly. "Someone is watching the apartment."

He stops looking through their knives. "Who?"

"In a car," she says. "Sunglasses."

Mike remembers a man with his feet propped up against the dashboard, cocky and arrogant, insisting he was waiting for someone else. Parked in his spot, with a perfect view of their windows. "The station wagon?"

The words mean nothing to her. "The car with the ugly brown stripes down the sides."

"*Fuck.*" He grabs the duffle, but drops it right after. Where is he going to go without being followed? "He's out there right now?"

She just stares at him. He knows the answer to that question.

"Fuck," he says again, as eloquent as ever, and starts pacing back and forth by the kitchen table, "OK, OK, I think I have an idea."

"For what?"

"Will is alive," he says, looking at her briefly to address her question but otherwise staring at the floor as he walks. He feels like he's being too expressive with his hands, "and I think he's at the lab."

Eleven, who's resting expression is as serious and solemn as it gets, is hard and sober when he looks back at her. He doesn't have to say anything else to know she believes him.

It's why you couldn't find him, he thinks, and the realization is the last damning puzzle piece snapping into place that he needs.

-

"I'm getting real fucking sick of Hawkins lab," Mike says, pulling into

Lucas' driveway and shutting off his car.

"We know you are, man, but try to tone it down with murderous vibes," Dustin says, getting out of the back. "We're trying to look like we're about to have *fun*."

"I know what we're doing," Mike hisses, not looking back at him. Eleven walks around the hood of the car and says nothing. She doesn't have to act, and Mike's a bit jealous. "It's my plan."

"Guys," Max grits through her teeth. She throws her arms around both of their shoulders, walking with them up to the house. "*Shut up.*"

Eleven's already knocked by the time they all reach the porch, and Mrs. Sinclair opens the door. She has the grace to only look mildly baffled by the four people standing on her doorstep at 9 o'clock, and smiles when no one says anything to explain their sudden appearance.

"Lucas is up in his room. Can I help you?"

Everyone opens their mouth to answer, but Eleven makes it there first. "Yes," she says, gaze intent and penetrating. "We need him."

Once upon a time this may have earned a bad reaction, but Mrs. Sinclair has spent enough time with Eleven to know how she is. She smiles a bit. "Any reason why?"

"What she means is--" Dustin starts.

"We're having a sleepover," Mike finishes. Mrs. Sinclair raises her eyebrows. "At my place. Everyone's invited. Did he not tell you?"

She inclines her head, as though she still can't believe it. "On a Wednesday."

"Yeah." Dustin nods, grinning.

Max smiles and shrugs. "That's probably why he didn't tell you."

Mrs. Sinclair opens the door, and they all file in, scrubbing their feet

obediently on the welcome mat. "Don't stay too long," she warns. "Erica's got school in the morning, and you know how she gets when she doesn't sleep. And make sure to be quiet when you leave. I don't want another one of you tripping down the stairs."

All eyes turn to Mike and he sighs, rolling his eyes. "It was one time, Mrs. Sinclair."

"One time too many," she says, walking around them.

"Do you mind if I leave my car parked in your driveway?" Mike asks. "We'll probably just walk from here."

"As long as you're not blocking anybody else."

"Thanks."

She disappears around the corner, and they all head up the stairs to Lucas' room. Half of the plan is already done, and Mike hasn't decided if it was the easiest or hardest part. The whole thing feels a bit the same. They could get caught at any moment, but it's likely he's vastly underestimating the difficulty of breaking into what used to be a high security facility.

Mike knocks on Lucas' door now, and all four of them jump when they hear something slam. "Erica, I *swear*--"

When Lucas opens the door he looks like he's about to go into the longest rant of his life, if not then certainly the most passionate. Mike opens his mouth to say something but finds no words forthcoming.

"Are you two bonding again?" Dustin says, and Mike hears his smile more than sees it.

"I'm gonna hit you, I swear," Lucas says, eyes traveling to each of them in turn. "What are you all doing here?"

"Are your blinds open?" Dustin asks, pushing past Mike.

"No, but--"

"Great."

All of them walk into the room, and Max closes the door, gravitating toward Lucas. It's awkward, almost like all of them want to sit but are too nervous to do so.

Mike starts pacing again.

With that, they all fall into some realm of normalcy. Max folds her arms, Lucas folds *his* arms, Dustin wipes the palms of his hands down his jeans, and Eleven stands off to the side watching.

"What's going on?" Lucas asks, looking at Max first but then Mike.

"Will is alive," he says, for the fourth time that night.

Lucas' entire expression shifts, and Mike can feel how wholly and absolutely *done* he is without needing to look. "Are we really gonna do this again--"

"No, Lucas, we're not," Mike snaps. He stops pacing, walking across the room to stand in front of Lucas. He's the tallest out of the group, and he uses it to his advantage, looming over him. "You're either in, or you're out, and if you're out, we're leaving without you."

-

"I can't believe you guys," Lucas hisses, swinging his flashlight around to see the ground. "Do you even have anything to get in there? What if they attack us, or something?"

"Then I hope you brought the wrist-rocket," Dustin says. He climbs over a tree and hisses when he runs into a tree branch.

"Are you stupid?" Lucas pushes the branch out of the way, shining his flashlight on Dustin's face. "Of course I brought it." Dustin smiles, but Lucas turns his attention to Mike, who's waiting for all of them. "But what if somebody with, say, a *gun*, attacks us."

Mike looks down at him from the top of the hill he's standing at. "Then, one, we have El attack *them*; two, we have El steal their gun; or three, we shoot them."

"With *what*?"

Mike pulls a revolver out of the inside of his coat. “ *My gun.*”

Lucas jerks backward, and Max walks around him, trekking up the side of the hill. Eleven is staring at Mike, unimpressed with all the heavy lifting she’s going to have to do. He smiles at her.

“Where did you get a gun?” Lucas asks, rushing to catch up with them. Dustin is left scrambling to keep up.

“Nancy.” He puts it back in his pocket, and Eleven catches him when he almost trips on a tree root.

They all lay on their stomachs, waiting for Lucas’ signal. He’s looking through his binoculars, high above them in a tree he’s scaled. It’s silent for a while, each of them trying to assess the situation, trying to find a direct route in.

“There’s a camera,” Lucas says, and although his voice is quiet, it’s startling in the silence.

“If we’re caught, we’re screwed,” Max says. She scratches the side of her face, thinking, and in the paltry moonlight Mike can see she’s gotten mud in her eyebrow.

“We won’t get caught, we just have to be really--”

A crunch of plastic cuts him off, and he looks at Eleven, who looks back at him. She stands up, walking off. Mike lifts his hands up off the ground in a shrug.

“Don’t tire yourself out,” he calls, following her down the hill. She barely hesitates before ripping through the chainlink. “El,” he says, grabbing her shoulder.

She looks up at Mike, and he can see stubborn determination in the lines of her face, but her eyes shine with worry. She doesn’t try to fight him, rarely does, but he doesn’t think he’s managing to calm her down, either. He probably looks just as concerned as she does. He’s definitely shown it over the past year.

It’s been so long, he thinks.

“We have to get him out,” she says, halfway through her teeth.

“That’s what we’re doing,” Mike says. He can hear everyone skidding down the hill behind him. “We’re going to get him out.” And it sounds so sure even he can believe it. “But you have to take it easy.”

“She flipped a van over our heads when we were 13,” Lucas says, starting past them. He knows they’ll follow, and they do.

“That was when we were 13, and she was still using her powers regularly.” They stop using their flashlights, and do their best to be as quiet as possible traversing the grounds. No one knows who’s around, or how many of who. “She hasn’t done anything that big or that much in years.” *But she’s been practicing.*

Lucas peers around the corner of the building, and looks at Eleven. “Another camera,” he whispers, barely audible.

She walks forward, peeking just as he did, and Mike hears another crunch. They’re missing something, they have to be. It’s impossible it’s that easy. It always is.

“She’ll be fine,” Lucas brushes him off, walking forward again. “If not, at least trust she’ll tell you if she can’t keep going. I don’t want to have to pull two people out of this place.”

The glass door is cracked and broken, and each of them step through one after another. Mike and Dustin are taking up the rear by unspoken vote, and Max is in the middle, head swinging back and forth, with Lucas scoping everything out and Eleven doing all the work.

“What if we end up dragging ten kids out of here?” Mike asks.

Lucas turns to look at Mike, and his stare is hard and unwavering. “We won’t.”

They all creep farther into the building, flashlights going on again once they’re far enough away from the open door, and Mike gets the weirdest feeling of open hallways and stale air. It feels and looks like it hasn’t been used in years, which it hasn’t, he supposes. It’s still the same mess he remembers from the night they escaped, and Mike

swings his flashlight along the floor, thinking he may find a skeleton and hoping he doesn't.

But there is no skeleton. There is blood he thinks, but among closer inspection he finds it's just his imagination. They're hardly over the threshold of the building and he *hates* it.

"El," he says, walking forward. She stops and looks at him. "You lead."

Lucas looks like he wants to argue, but thinks better of it, and nods at her. She looks between the two of them, and after a breath, gives a short nod, and starts off. It leaves them all rushing to keep up, feet crunching through broken glass and old pieces of wood.

"It's a good thing we're all wearing shoes," Dustin mumbles, looking around at white walled hallways.

"Why wouldn't we be wearing shoes?" Lucas asks, shaking his head.

"Eleven wasn't wearing shoes when we found her."

"This place hadn't been destroyed by an army of dogs from an alternate dimension, either."

Dustin looks like he wants to say something, but runs the sentence through his mind again, and shrugs.

They file into a stairwell, footsteps echoing up, up, up as they go down, down, down, and Eleven stops on every floor to check their progress and see whether they are where she wants them to be. Eventually she stops, and Mike feels like he's halfway to the center of the earth. Everyone follows her out, and he shines his flashlight up, but doesn't see the ceiling.

Will's hospital room had windows, he thinks, and follows them all out.

Eleven leads them for what feels like hours. No one is around, there are no stray animals, the floor is dirty and untouched, and there's no trace of light. She starts stopping at random closed doors, opening them one by one, but each is the same as the last. Every light is off, every bed is made, and everything looks new. The air is stale, but

cleaner than the hallway. He doesn't even think they run electricity anymore.

He starts to lose hope. What if there's another shifty lab in another small town just like Hawkins, and Will happened to get picked up by those people instead of *these* ones? What then? There's a hundred small towns in the US, and he's sure at least a couple of them were in contact with Hawkins.

Eleven stops, leaning away from a door they start to pass, and all of them do the same. It's dim, practically imperceptible, but there's light shining underneath the door, faint though it is. She tries the handle, but it's locked.

She backs up again, glaring at the doorknob, and rather than unlocking it, sends half the door crumpling in on itself and swinging against the wall.

All of them clamber forward, hands all over each other as they try to squeeze into the room at the same time. Mike doesn't think he's ever heard so many people say Will's name at once.

And they all stop as one, too. There's a girl sitting propped up in her bed, hands hovering in thin air above her desk. There's a plant sitting there that she was making to grab, but her wide eyes and frozen stature speak of surprise and fear.

They all stare right back, and Mike opens his mouth to speak. *We can't just leave her here.*

But she doesn't wait long enough for him to say as much. She screams, high pitched and petrified, and Mike grabs what's left of the door and slams it shut just as she throws the plant.

"I don't think she wants to come with us!" Lucas yells.

They're screwed. If there's one person in the lab, there's a hundred more running the experiment. It's a sound ratio in Mike's mind.

"Go!" he shouts, herding them all forward. Eleven is frozen, staring at the door, her feet covered in loose silt.

When Mike gives her a good shake and drags her, she finally comes back into herself. Lucas runs to the next door, tries it, and it swings open to another empty room. It continues down the hallway, every room empty, and Mike really starts to panic. How can there be so many empty rooms?

They turn a corner, still opening doors, and halfway down the hallway one is locked again. They hear a bed creak, but no further sound.

Eleven steps forward, focusing on the door, but nothing happens. She furrows her eyebrows, confused, and inclines her head, clenching her fists. All of them stare at the door, but nothing happens.

“What’s wrong?” Max asks.

Lucas shakes the door. “Why isn’t it working?”

Dustin steps forward, and Mike feels him pressed close to his side. “Is she doing it right?”

“I’m pretty sure she knows what she’s doing, Dustin!”

“I’m just asking, there’s no reason to yell!”

“This is a high stress mission, there’s plenty reason!”

“Shut up!” Mike snaps. He sets his hand on Eleven’s shoulder, and steps around to look down at her. “What’s wrong?”

But she doesn’t look up at him. Her hands are fisted in her pants, and Mike can see that they’re shaking. “I don’t know.”

He looks back at the door, and rests his hand on it, jostling it slightly. It’s a normal door, it just has a lock. An extremely hard to open lock.

Mike can hear the scuffle of shoes far away, and he looks back down the hallway, trying to listen for the woman. There is no sound from her. He stares for a moment. “It’s her,” he says, but he doesn’t know what to do with the information. What are they going to do? Knock her out? He doesn’t want to do that.

“What’s her?” Lucas asks, following Mike’s line of sight.

Dustin's eyes light up. "She has powers, too!" he says, and Mike can see his mind whirring away. He's trying to piece together another solution, or maybe he's just enraptured by the implications of scientific boundaries being pushed. Mike knows he's figured everything out, so he ignores him.

"El can't use her powers. We need to find a way to open this door," Mike says. The footsteps sound like they're coming down the stairs, shuffling closer, but Mike can't tell how close.

He needs to pace, he needs to *think*. But it's loud and people are panicking and he's on such a short time limit that nothing is forthcoming, and he's left with scattered threads of thought that mean nothing when they aren't strung together. He starts tapping his foot, and tangles his fingers in his hair, trying to block out Dustin and Lucas' yelling. Why won't anything *come*?

"Give me that," Max says suddenly, commanding. She jerks forward, unzipping Mike's jacket, and grabs the revolver.

"You can't shoot through the door--" he starts. *I already thought of that--*

But she stalks off, gun in hand, finger curled around the trigger. They all watch her go, listening to the *crunch, crunch, crunch* of her feet over broken tile and old wood, and wait. Mike feels his chest tighten, and tries to breathe. He's never been so impatient in his life.

There's the quiet sound of murmuring, gentle and threatening, and Mike hears the cock of a gun.

"*Do it!*" Max yells, voice hoarse.

As soon as she shouts, Eleven has the door caving in on itself. It's not like before at all, where she just sent it breaking away from the wall--the entire door ends up in a heap on the ground, the size of a football. Mike glances at Eleven and sees her livid expression. She stomps into the room.

It's empty, full of a thousand touches from childish hands. Crayon drawings, a stuffed animal propped up in the corner of the bed. A

nightlight.

It looks recently disturbed, but there's no sign of anyone nearby, and they hover just on the threshold, looking into the pristine room. Not daring to touch.

Eleven looks like she's going to be sick, skin pallid in the fluorescent lighting, and Mike pulls her away from the door. "Come on," he says, starting off down the hallway again and pulling her along with him.

Where is everyone? Mike thinks, trying to focus on the other noises in the building rather than Dustin's nervous murmuring. The footsteps he heard earlier still sound like they're coming, but the more Mike listens, the more they sound like echos. They could be coming, or going, and the way sound travels through the building distorts his perception of their location. They could be right around the corner or on the first level of the building, and he would have no idea.

They walk, and they walk, and they walk, and eventually they find themselves on the next floor down. There's empty rooms with one-way mirrors, broken and eerie, and every inch of the walls is covered in dingy white tiles. Eleven is tense against Mike, hands clutched to her chest and eyes downcast.

"We'll leave soon," he promises, thumb rubbing circles into her shoulder. He's never felt a worse guilt, and it sits in his chest, heavy and dark. "We'll leave and we won't have to come back."

She nods, accepting his word, but is otherwise silent.

They turn a corner with a dead end, and Lucas stops, swivelling around. He's jittery, hands swinging in expressive arcs. They left Max upstairs, gun her only protection, and Mike thinks that may be a contributing factor to Lucas' short fuse. "Are you sure he's even here?" he asks, looking at Mike. "How do we know we're not just being led into a trap? If we go down any further I don't even think there'll be any floor left!"

And he's right. There's one door at the end of the hallway, tucked away on the right, but there's no keycard or doorknob, and Mike doesn't see any light coming from under it. They've been led on a

wild goose chase, or they missed something important. Mike's going to get them all killed over a ghost.

Eleven shakes her head, and when Mike looks down at her she's crying, bottom lip tucked between her teeth. Her hands are at her sides again, fingers digging crescents into the meat of her palm. "I can't," she whispers, and the words come out wet and slurred.

Mike steps in front of her, ready to turn around and leave, maybe go further down, maybe go back up, but he looks back at the door. He doesn't ask what happened, doesn't ask which part of her past is hidden behind that door. Instead he sidles toward it slowly, flashlight held out in front of him.

It's huge. The door is heavy metal, with a fat turning hatch, old and rusted. Mike grabs it and pulls with every bit of his weight. It turns, slow, and the hallways echoes with a terrible screeching sound.

He worries immediately that he's making noise for no reason. It sounds like the room hasn't been used in all the years the lab has been 'abandoned', so to speak, but that's exactly why Mike keeps turning. They'd let the entire place fall to rubble if it kept their projects secret, and Mike's seen it happen firsthand.

The sound the door makes when he pulls it open is even worse, and he winces, peeking inside the crack he's made. It's completely dark inside, no trace of light, but he can tell it's small from the way the sound travels. He twists his flashlight in his hand, shining it inside.

The relief almost knocks him to the floor. "Will."

Will looks up at him, movements slow, and his head thunks against the wall. His nose to his chin is covered in blood, and when he turns Mike can see blood running from his ears to his neck.

He smiles, sluggish and sedated. Blood stains his teeth. "You came."

Yes, yes, of course, there's no way I wouldn't-- But all that comes out of his mouth is the same thing as before. "Will," he chokes out, shoving the door open and pushing his way in. He's moving so fast his shoes slip on the dirty floor, and he crouches next to Will, hands hovering

above him. He's there, in front of Mike, he's real, he's *alive*. "We're gonna get you out of here," he says, another promise. How many has he made just tonight? How many can he keep?

"Is he in there?!" Lucas shouts, head appearing in the doorway. He shines his flashlight on them both, voice leaden with hope.

"Yes!" Mike chirps back, feeling the same way. Dustin's face pushes in beside Lucas' a second later with rapidfire questions.

He's needs to pick Will up, or at least get him moving, but Mike's afraid to lay his hands on him. Will looks fatigued and bruised, pale as a ghost and three steps away from being one. Mike lays his hand on Will's hip, feeling bone.

"If I put you on my back, could you hold on?" he asks, squeezing just a bit. The reality of the touch grounds him.

Will nods. "I think so."

Mike wants to be able to help, to do something. He really, really does. But trying to pick up Will's deadweight is not his strong suit. He may be the tallest in the party, but he's certainly not the strongest, and thin as Will's always been, Mike's always been a bit weedy to match.

"Dustin!" Mike yells, turning his face to the door. Dustin stops talking, eyebrows shooting up. "I need you to carry Will!"

"OK, yeah, yeah," Dustin says, agreeing easily.

He presses his chest to the door, bracing himself to push, and puts all his strength forward.

A gunshot goes off overhead, and they all look up.

"That was the revolver," Dustin says, quiet.

That's all the time they take to mull it over. Lucas curls his fingers into his palms, eyes frantic, "Get him. We need to get out of here."

Dustin shoves door, opening it so there's enough room for him to

comfortably pass in and out, and jogs to the back where Will is laying. Another shot goes off, much louder, and Lucas starts bouncing. Mike can see his throat working.

“Be careful,” Mike urges when Dustin starts to scoop Will up. “Don’t hurt him, and make sure you--”

“He’s not fine china, Mike,” Dustin says, situating Will on his back. Will loops his arms around Dustin’s neck. “I know what I’m doing.” He walks out of the isolated room, and Mike hears him murmur, “It’s not the first time I’ve carried Will.”

Will laughs, hardly a breath of air, but he’s there and he’s breathing, and every moment Mike sees him is even better than the last.

“Hey, guys,” Will says, barely managing a smile. He wraps his arms around Dustin’s neck, leaning his cheek against Dustin’s shoulder. Mike’s never seen a person look so mentally and physically exhausted.

Eleven is already on her way to the stairwell when they catch up to her, but Lucas overtakes her with long strides. He looks frantic, squirrely and wild, and they all struggle to keep up with his long strides. It’s less like jogging anymore and something more akin to a sprint.

“Slow down, Lucas, geez!” Dustin says, one arm on Will’s leg and the other dragging himself up the stairwell. “Will, buddy,” he wheezes, hiking Will further up when they get to the landing, “I swear you gained ten pounds right there.”

Will smiles, weary, but doesn’t reply. Mike feels like his presence is irritating Dustin, but he can’t help but match him stride for stride. Just in case.

The room they found empty is a marker, bright lit and clean, and they rush by, Lucas still at the head of the party. Eleven glances at it, and Mike sees something complicated pass through her gaze that he’s not sure he can even begin to understand.

Lucas slaps his hands on the woman’s door frame, stopping so fast

that Eleven almost knocks him to the floor. “Max--”

He straightens, taking a step back, and Mike comes up behind him. “What’s--”

He swallows, mouth dry, and stares down the barrel of a gun.

-

They’re not told anything. The man is wearing gear from head to toe, something Mike hasn’t seen for seven years, and walks behind Mike with stout footsteps, butting him in the small of his back with the muzzle of his gun at random intervals. He’s going fast enough, but Mike’s sure the soldier just likes the idea of marking him with bruises.

They slow down on the stairs with Dustin carrying Will, and Mike can see the strain it’s putting on him. The soldier grunts, and Mike sticks to his place directly behind Dustin, taking the brunt of his impatience. He can feel his back starting to sting and go tender.

It’s completely dark outside when they get out of the lab, no indication of any time of day besides *early* , but it’s obvious where they’re going. There’s a car parked close to the building, lights on, and Mike can see the mass of people standing in front of it from where they are. They slow down, walking a steady, nervous pace.

Mike can see Max’s hair lit up in front of the car, and knows Lucas must be struggling. The closer they get the less of an outline she becomes, and more of a distinct figure. She’s somewhat slumped, arms held behind her, and Mike can see that her coat is patchy with blood.

They step into the circle and are swallowed by soldiers, but the people hardly clear away before Mike hears it.

“*Eleven.*”

It’s quiet and surprised and almost a bit reverent. Mike’s skin break out in gooseflesh. The five of them still called her Eleven, used as a nickname under her blessing--Mike still called her El--but something about it this time feels so *wrong* . He’s never wanted to take a word

out of someone's mouth so much before.

It's an older man, thin, with white hair. His eyes are wide and staring, not with a pleased shock but a kind of hunger, and that's what draws Mike away from his face. His skin is a concave line down one cheek, and Mike can see puckered marks in patterns down his face.

He looks weatherworn, and his face is so distorted by the scarring that at first Mike doesn't recognize him, but when he does he feels the same cold, awful helplessness he did when he was a kid.

Eleven stares right back, expression pinched. "Papa."

There's so much of a threat lingering around them. Just looking Mike can see that they're outnumbered, but it's not an impossible number of people. The guns are a problem unless Eleven can manage them. But standing next to Brenner, eyes empty, is the woman from downstairs.

Seeing the way Brenner looks at Eleven makes him reluctant to think that he would have them all shot. "Can you still use your powers, Eleven?" he asks, quiet and curious. The threat of disappointment lingers just behind his expression, as if he'll turn it on her if he doesn't hear the right answer.

"Why, you wanna feel 'em firsthand?" Mike snaps before he can think about it. He leans into each word, head turning.

Brenner turns to Mike, smile falling into place on his face. It's not pleasant in the slightest. "Yes, I remember you," he says, nodding. He folds his hands in front of him. "I'm not here to start trouble, boys."

It's the last thing Mike wants to hear. Brenner's existence is trouble, he breathes it, carries it around with him in soldiers and tests. For the first time in his life Mike finds himself hating the scientific field.

"Then leave," he says, swinging his hand in a wide arc, ignorant of the guns following his every move.

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

“Oh yeah? Why not?”

“You’re in college now, yes?” It’s not a question. Mike doesn’t want to know where he got the information. “Slaving away to make your higher-ups happy.” Brenner splay his fingers against his chest. “I have to meet quota, too, Michael.”

“You’re enjoying it,” he snaps. “Admit it. It’s not about meeting quota, you’re just glad you’re being sanctioned to kidnap.”

He doesn’t. He doesn’t say anything. Maybe, if Mike had played his cards a bit smarter, he could’ve held the situation in his favor. But Brenner’s smile is gone, and he looks thoroughly finished with their conversation. If they had been younger, he may have stared down his nose at Mike, but as it is he has to look up, and the look of scorn is almost underwhelming. Almost.

“We’re going to let you all off the hook,” he says, looking down and adjusting his cufflinks. Lucas nods, but it’s wide eyed and mocking. “Some in better shape than others.”

“Fuck you,” Max snarls, spitting. When Mike glances at her he sees the revolver in the belt of the soldier holding her.

She’s far enough away that it lands on Brenner’s shoe, but that’s almost worse. His lips thin. “And you’re not going to tell anyone what happened here tonight.”

Mike glares, resolve hard as diamond in his chest. He’s not leaving tonight unless it’s on his terms. “And Will?”

“Your friend stays.”

It’s said so casually that both Mike and Lucas step forward, ready for a fight. Eleven tenses, following hot at Mike’s heels, and the woman next to Brenner glares at her. Guns cock.

“He’s coming with *us*,” Lucas says.

Brenner looks as though he’s trying his best not to frown, but forces a smile through it. “Surely there’s an agreement we can work out,” he says it like it’s meant to be a joke, like he’s not giving them a choice

but wants them to think they have one. Mike's shoulders itch, hot with fury.

"Compromise?" Eleven asks. She's glaring.

Mike's never been on the end of that look, and he doesn't envy Brenner. If looks could kill, Eleven's could, and Mike's sure if she wanted him to be, Brenner would already be six feet under.

But Brenner grins under her gaze. "Yes! Yes, Eleven," he says, spoken like she's never grown past 12 in his eyes.

Eleven's expression twists even more, if possible. She pauses to speak, and Mike doesn't have to hear the word to know Brenner's dug himself a hole too deep to escape. "No."

Brenner looks shocked, mouth opening without words, and the revolver jerks out of the soldier's belt towards Mike. He reaches his hand out for it, ready to take advantage of the surprise, but it gives a jolt in the air and falls a few feet short, clattering to the ground. Eleven makes a sound beside him, frustrated, but he's too preoccupied to look. He runs for it.

"No!" Brenner shouts suddenly. Mike's shocked to hear it's not at him. "Don't shoot her!"

'Don't shoot her,' isn't the same as, *"Don't shoot him,"* and Mike isn't deluded enough to think Brenner wouldn't kill him to get his way. If he can cover up Will's death-- *twice* --and make it look like an accident, Mike will be a walk in the park.

Brenner is running at him, but Mike slaps his hands on the gun first. He has enough time for the rush of triumph to hit him, the smile, the spark of hope, of *maybe, just maybe* --but then the heel of Brenner's shoe comes crashing down on his fingers. He yelps, pulling his hand back on reflex, but finds himself stuck.

Mike's thoughts are a mess. He can hear Dustin yelling behind him, low, low, low over Lucas' shrill panic, and Max is *screaming*. The shuffle of boots and clink of gear punctuate the chaos, turning it into its own special sort of dissonance. He's afraid to turn around. He

looks up at Brenner, who's glaring down at him, shoe cutting into the webbing of Mike's hand.

He has his own gun, Mike sees, a pistol. Brenner turns it on him slowly, pointed right between his eyes.

You see this on movies, Mike thinks absently, so afraid he feels like he's not in his own body anymore. *And it's the best part*. It doesn't feel like the best part now.

Eleven is shrieking, adding to the din behind Mike, and dimly he hears his name being called. Max is somewhere close, yelling at him to *get up, move, do something, Mike--!*

"Did you think we wouldn't kill any of you?" Brenner asks. He looks slightly flustered, out of breath, and he fixes his hair with his hand. "It will be easy to cover up. Dropping you from from the lower levels of the facility. An accident, of course. Kids exploring a long abandoned lab without any structure left, so much deeper than you thought." It sounds like a promise.

Brenner fixes his collar and Mike, numb and hyper-focusing, sees white hair, wrinkles and liver spots.

Old.

In a burst of dumb inspiration, Mike jerks his free hand off the ground, trying to beat Brenner's finger to the trigger. He slams his palm into the back of Brenner's knee, and Brenner crumples. Mike ducks away from the gun, trying to avoid the arc it's swinging through the air right in front of his head, and curls his fingers around the revolver, feeling that lightness of triumph lifting the weight off his lungs again. He's so *close*.

The pistol goes off, and in a brief, brief, flash of thought, all Mike knows is, *I can't avoid that*.

It hits, and Mike feels the burn, the *ache*, hot and stinging. He panics all over again. If Brenner shot him, that means he's dead, and if he's dead then what's he experiencing? The afterlife? What about his friends? What about his promise to get them out? They rely on him,

and he's let them down when they needed him most.

But the thought is there and gone again in a fraction of a second, and Mike scrambles back away from Brenner, who's on the ground now. His arm is warm and wet.

"Mike!"

"Mike, are you OK?!"

"Get up!"

Mike doesn't need to be told twice. He spins around onto his hands, almost falling onto his chest when his left arm gives out underneath him, and pushes himself up, feet sliding on the frost when he struggles to run towards them.

Hands wrap around him when he crashes into the party, patting. In the fray Max made it to everybody, and he sees her hunched over, hand pressed hard to her abdomen and Lucas' arms around her shoulders. He turns around, ready to face Brenner, but he's still on the ground, being helped up by one of the soldiers. The woman stands directly in front of them, face impassable and incensed at the same time.

Mike points the revolver at her. It looks terrible, he's sure, pointing a gun at a woman in a hospital gown, but Mike has no qualms. She's standing over Brenner, and Mike's standing in front of his friends. Maybe they're both doing it for the same reason, but he knows for a fact which one of them is in the right.

His fingers are steady when he cocks the gun. *"Move."*

The woman glowers at him. "No."

"You may be able to stop other people's powers, but you can't stop a bullet," he says. He has no idea if it's true, if he's just throwing bluffs out into the wind.

She says nothing else, and he's not sure what that means. Eleven walks forward, and the woman focuses on her again, likely seeing her for the larger threat she really is. Brenner is the only one moving, and

when he stands up the circle around them is completely still.

“Let us go,” Eleven demands.

The woman doesn’t hesitate to speak this time. “He raised you.”

It’s the wrong thing to say. Eleven is incandescent with rage, and every gun in the circle whips to Brenner. “*That wasn’t raising.*”

They whip away just as fast, and Mike knows Eleven’s lost her hold again. Someone, breaking protocol, points the gun at Eleven, and Mike knows that’s his cue to act *fast*. His gun, already aimed, feels heavy in his hands. *I’m going to kill someone*, he thinks, and finds that he’s so amped up on adrenaline that he doesn’t care. He’s surprised his hands aren’t shaking.

Mike pulls the trigger before the soldier can, and he knows as soon as he does that he’s missed the target. The bullet hits the woman in the arm, and he has enough time for the panic to set in to know he won’t be able to shoot again.

He doesn’t need to. He expected her to stumble a bit, maybe grab her arm, but stay standing. If he’s learned anything from Eleven it’s that she has an incredibly high pain tolerance, and he doubts the woman differs. But the wound is gushing, staining her clean hospital gown a deep wine red, making it hug her skin. She grasps at it, face shocked.

No one waits. Every gun goes off, and Mike winces, whipping his hands up reflexively. He’s going to die a stain in an abandoned parking lot.

Little pings punctuate his thoughts, and he peeks out, jumping back when more than one solid figure falls inward. Blood pools around his shoes, and he steps away. He’d underestimated how quickly it all would happen. He wasn’t quite sure that would work at all, he admits to himself, ashamed. They all could have died for his decision. But they didn’t.

“Take her, Helms!” Brenner yells, trotting to keep up with someone in a lab coat. “Get her into the--”

He cuts off, body stopping mid stride, and Mike knows for a fact he

can't hold the pose normally. The scientist--Helms, he said--glances behind him when Brenner stops, but keeps going.

Eleven waits until the woman and Helms are in the car and pulling away to let Brenner go, and by then the only light they have left to go on is the flashlights littering their feet. It throws pale, unsettling shapes over everyone's faces, especially Brenner, who's mauled skin looks sunken and vivid as ivory. Mike, although unsettled, doesn't move. Just behind Eleven, right in front of everyone else.

She turns, quick and vicious, and grabs the gun out of Mike's hand.

"Eleven--" Brenner closes his eyes when Eleven points the gun at his forehead. Mike wants to think he's accepting what's happening, but when he opens his eyes again Mike thinks he's probably seeing nothing but what a cruel twist it is. "What are you doing?"

"Did you think we wouldn't kill you?" she mocks, cocking the gun.

He stares down at her. "Is this for him?" he asks, nodding towards Will. Mike glances at him, worried. He hasn't uttered a single word since they got outside.

"No. It's for both of us."

Brenner sighs, long suffering. He turns a pitious look on her. "I tried my best with you, Eleven," he says, and the way he shapes the words adds, *'But you never were a very good child'*.

Mike knew an Eleven once who would balk at those words, let them haunt her until the day she died. Mulling them over in her head until they poisoned every one of her thoughts and left nothing else in their wake. He grew up with that Eleven.

He also watched her grow *out* of it.

Brenner closes his eyes, either pleased with his hand in life or happy with his piece, and the careful upturn of his head is obvious acceptance. It makes Mike's blood boil. That he gets the last word. That things will end, easy as a gunshot.

Eleven seems to have the same idea. Brenner chokes, body frozen,

and blood trickles from his nose in a slow, slow river. His eyes bleed from the corners, still shut, and Mike jerks his gaze away. It's quiet, like the forest is holding its breath, and that only makes Brenner's gasps louder.

"Not good enough," Eleven says.

Brenner lands in a heap at her feet.

It's quiet. So, so quiet. No one talks, and no one moves, but everyone stares. They are surrounded by a ring of destruction.

"Guys," Dustin whispers.

It takes a second for anyone to respond. "Hmm?" Lucas hums.

"I think I'm gonna puke," he says, voice full volume. He hurries forward, and Eleven eases Will off his back, holding him in her arms like he weighs nothing. Dustin runs out of the circle, uncaring of the mess he's dragging across the pavement.

Now that the immediate shock is wearing off, Mike is shaky, and he feels his stomach churn uncomfortably. He groans, following Dustin. "Me, too."

Three sets of footsteps follow them, toeing between the bodies. Mike hears Max laugh, but she groans at the end. "Never seen blood before?"

He knows it's a joke, he does, but bent over and spitting onto the concrete all he can find it in himself to do is flip her off. His entire body feels fatigued, like they've been at the lab for weeks and not twenty minutes, tops.

"Stop, stop," Dustin whispers, walking closer and waving his hand like he's trying to pat Mike on the back but can't quite see where he is. "You're gonna make me throw up again."

Mike stands up, leaning away from him. They both hold their flashlights up again. They're green in the face, and when Dustin breathes out to ground himself Mike gasps. "Go stand over there."

"Like you don't need a mint, too." He bumps his shoulder into Mike's when he walks by, good natured and light enough to raise Mike's spirit just a bit.

Mike follows him back. Dustin starts hopping up and down, shaking his arms out, and turns his face to the sky when he breathes out through his mouth. It creates a cloud of white, and Mike worries. "OK, I'm ready," Dustin says, turning around and squatting.

"Hold on, hold on," Mike says, jogging over. He's been lugging around a duffle bag all night for one reason, and intends to make use of it.

He pulls out an outfit he'd thrown together before leaving the house--the warmest articles of clothing he could find, and starts slipping them onto Will piece by piece with help from Dustin and Lucas. Mike can still feel the chill through his clothes, and he knows it's not nearly enough for Will to keep him warm, but it's something. Lucas slips a hat onto Will's head, and Dustin hoists him up onto his back.

"Can we hurry up?" Lucas asks, but when Mike looks at him he can see the unhidden worry shining in his eyes. *I want to help him.* But, never one to share his feelings, he glances at Max, and shakes his shoulders. "My legs hurt."

Mike starts walking, pointing his flashlight in front of himself and walking toward the end of the parking lot. They're going to have to walk all the way around the building and through the woods. His body is still shaky, and although he knows it wasn't a possibility, he wishes he had brought the car. "Lucas, your girlfriend has a bullet hole in her stomach."

Lucas stares at him. "You think I'm blind?" Dustin snorts, and Lucas looks at him. "Just say it. You never wait any other time."

They immediately start arguing, and Mike ignores them. Max is trodding along beside him, footsteps heavy and sluggish. He purses his lips. "Are you alright?"

"I'm not dying right this second, if that's what you're asking," she answers, not looking at him. Her left hand is clamped down on her

stomach.

“Kinda, yeah,” he mumbles. It feels insufficient.

The get to the other side of the building, and start the trek up into the woods. Mike’s bunched up his shirt and jacket to keep them pressed against his arm, which has begun to throb dully. It’s unpleasant and achy and it makes his stomach roll so much he wants to sit down and put his head between his knees.

He reaches the top of the hill and stops to wait. They’re all at varying distances, but Mike sees Eleven at the bottom of the hill, hands held in front of her at arm’s length. He points his flashlight at her, squinting. She’s shaking, like she’s struggling under some gargantuan weight.

“Eleven?” he calls.

A structure beam snaps at the very base of the building, and it starts to tilt. The creak of metal and snap of wire is clear, screaming in the silence. The building caves inward, almost exploding in some places from the force Eleven’s putting on it. It falls and falls, and dimly Mike realizes Eleven’s collapsed it all the way to the underground tunnels.

She turns around to face them again, wiping at her bloodied nose with the back of her hand, and trucks up the hill. Mike closes his mouth.

“There was nobody inside,” she says.

As if that was their biggest worry, and not the police that are sure to arrive at any moment and the group of bodies they’re going to find.

Mike shakes off his awe. *Hopper’s gonna kill us both.*

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“Hi!” Lucas says, panting, as they all pile into Mike’s very-much-not-meant-for-six-people car. “My name’s Michael Wheeler! And I didn’t bring a getaway car to our heist!” He puts his seatbelt on, and, surprisingly, doesn’t kick up a fuss about the lack of space.

Mike slams the driver's side door shut, and almost groans at the relief he feels when he gets to sit again. His arm throbs fiercely when he leans back in the seat, and he sighs, putting on his seatbelt. He turns on the car, and ratchets the heat as high up as it'll go. Max looks at him, hair blowing all over her face, and Mike stares. "What."

"Nothing," she says, pointing the vent into the back.

"Lucas, you know I couldn't bring the car," Mike says, leaning around the seat to see where he's backing up. Eleven stares directly at him from the middle, but he's used to it, "and you agreed to it."

Lucas huffs, staring out the window. Dustin looks at him, smiling. He's got Will, still out cold, seated across his lap. "Worried about the blisters you're gonna get? Worried that Max won't love you?" he teases. "If you knew would you still have gone? Or would you have made us take the car?"

Lucas turns to look at him. "Do you really wanna do this right now, Dustin?"

Dustin laughs, loud and boisterous. "If I said yes?"

"Switch spots with Eleven."

"Don't worry, Lucas," Max says, head resting on the window. "I can love both you *and* your foot blisters at the same time."

"Aw, Lucas, she's perfect. I just knew-- Mike, where are you going?"

Mike lifts his first few fingers off the steering wheel, shaking his head. He thought it was obvious. "The hospital?" he asks, glancing up at Dustin's face in the rearview mirror. "*Some of us* need urgent care."

"Are you gonna pay for Will with pocket change?" Dustin asks. "Go to Joyce's house."

"Dude, it's after midnight."

"Dude, she thinks her son is buried in the cemetery down the road," Dustin mocks. "Turn around."

Mike huffs, pulling into the nearest driveway, and does as he's told. He hates to admit it, but Dustin's right. "Didn't realize you were such a backseat driver," he mumbles.

"Shut up."

Mike speeds where he knows there aren't any police patrolling, and thankfully the drive to Will's house is only a couple of minutes when he's going the speed limit. They make it in half the time, and Mike gets out of the car, leaving it on. He hops up onto the porch, leaning against the doorframe to take some of the weight off his feet, and bangs on the door. Everything is spinning. He probably shouldn't be driving.

No one answers *immediately*, and Mike is under an immediate sort of pressure, so when he doesn't hear footsteps he slams his fist on the wood. Chester runs up to the door and starts barking. Mike can already feel a migraine coming on.

"Chester!" he hears Joyce hiss, footsteps creaking on the old wood.

"Mrs. Byers!" Mike says, not quite a yell but not quiet enough to be his speaking voice. He knocks normally. "Mrs. Byers I need your help!"

"Mike?" she asks. Each latch gets unlocked, and she peers out at him in the dark. She glances at the car. "What are you doing here? Do you know what time it is?" Her eyes widen when she sees the blood on his arm, still soaking into his sleeve slowly. "What happened to your arm?!"

"Yes, I know what time it is." He walks past her, into the kitchen, and strokes Chester's head briefly when he follows Mike. "Don't worry about my arm," he says, brushing her worry off. Where would a mom keep her son's health insurance? Where did his mom keep his? He turns around. "Did you cancel Will's health insurance?"

Joyce's face goes taut at the mention of her son. She folds her arms across her chest, fingers digging into her skin. "Of course I did." She watches Mike curse under his breath and turn and walk into the doorway. "What's this about, Mike? What happened?"

“We have Will,” he says. She opens her mouth, and he doesn’t know what she’s going to say, if she’s going to argue with him, but he’d rather explain with stitches in his arm than bleeding all over Joyce’s kitchen tiles. “No, he’s not dead. We’re going to the hospital right now. Are you coming?”

Joyce stops fretting at the news, and turns to stare at Mike like he’s said the stupidest thing she’s ever heard in her life.

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Mike hadn’t been able to see the wound with all his layers on, but he doesn’t get stitches. The gunshot was close range, and when the nurses take his shirt off he has to look away. There’s a hole on the outside of his left arm, a crater where the bullet’s torn through, too deep to be considered nicking. It looks like someone’s taken a knife and scooped his skin away. His stomach is rolling again.

When he wakes up dawn is rolling around, and they tell him to take it easy, to rest off the anesthetics, to try not to move his arm or leg, but Mike has never been very good at listening. Eleven is sitting by the window when he wakes up, and she waits until everyone is gone to help Mike into a wheelchair. He feels like he’s falling asleep the entire time she pushes him, but he forces himself to stay awake, half babbling.

Joyce looks up at them when they open the door, and Mike quiets down. She looks exhausted. The past couple of hours have passed in a blur, and her face is wrinkled with grief and anger. She’s got a wadded up tissue in her hand, and she presses it into the corners of her eyes. Eleven parks the wheelchair by the head of Will’s bed, locks the wheels, and sits down next to Hopper.

Dustin is asleep, head lying on the bed and face turned toward Will, soft snores leaving the silence somewhat comfortable. Lucas is nowhere to be seen, and Mike remembers that it’s probably been enough time for Max to get out of her own surgery. She probably can’t move.

“They said it’s fatigue,” Joyce says around a snuffle. “Some burns and bruises, but he’s gonna be OK. He just needs to sleep.” She breathes

in, long and deep and a little shaky. She looks over each of them in turn, but Lucas is gone with Max while she recovers, and only Eleven and Mike are available for questions. Mike is only half awake, so it's going to be a group effort. "What happened?"

Mike sighs as he thinks. He looks at Joyce, so desperate for answers, hand curled around Will's like a vice, eyes promising murder behind the relief. He talks.

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It takes Will a day and a half to wake up, hungry and disoriented and banged up. Joyce swaddles him in his hospital bed, refusing to leave his room, and by the end of the day she manages to have him back in his pjs at home. Mike gets an earful from Hopper when he comes to visit--finally released from the hospital--and he nods along. He's properly ashamed of his actions, really and truly, until he gets a heavy pat on the back that feels a bit like pride.

It takes a week for Will to convince Joyce to let him go back to the apartment, and she caves, but only because she's running out of clothes he can wear, and all of his stuff is in his room. Mike drives him back in silence, and Will stares out the window, distant. Mike's scared to speak. He's never felt so inept at starting conversation.

But it comes to him, as it always does. He just has to wait. Mike parks the car and walks around the front, trying to look like he's not watching Will like a hawk. Will, of course, notices the eyes on him immediately, and raises his eyebrows, shutting the car door.

"I'm fine, Mike," he says, walking toward him. His fingers are bunched in the worn material of his jacket, and he breathes into the cool December air, eyes following the cloud of white it creates.

"I know you are," Mike says, walking. *Physically*. They're starting over from square one, 13 again, and Mike has no idea where to start.

Will looks at him, and Mike looks back just quick enough to see Will's face turn away, expression twisting into something pinched and anguished. Mike purses his lips, feeling his stomach drop.

They reach the top flight of stairs, and Mike digs into his pocket, fishing for his keys. He has them halfway into the keyhole when Will curses, slipping.

Mike lurches, grabbing him, and reels him in before he falls. Will rests shaky hands on Mike's chest, eyes wide.

"Will, are you--"

Will lets his head fall onto Mike's chest, and laughs, maybe a tinge hysterical. Mike stares down at him, in Jonathan's old clothing and his mother's scarf, exhausted and hurting and tormented and *strong* -- so, so strong--and feels a rush of affection. He runs the palm of his hand over Will's hair, cupping the back of his head, and toys with the hair at the nape of his neck. He can hear Will crying, sobbing loud and unfettered into Mike's coat.

He dips his head in, resting his nose against Will's head. "Are you OK?" he whispers.

It's a stupid question, and he knows the answer at some baseline level, but he still asks. Will shakes his head, and his laughter sounds like choking. "I don't think I am."

Mike had been expecting silence. Will is indecisive, bad at explaining himself when language is so ill-disposed. It's Will's way of softening the blow of his words when he should be saying, *'No, Mike, I'm not, and I don't know how to be'* .

"I didn't get to see the snow last year," Will says, pulling away. He wipes at his cheeks with his fingertips, but the tears don't stop. He looks a little happy and a lot sad.

Mike doesn't know what to say, and everything that comes to mind seems wrong. Too much or too little. Make everything seem too trivial, or make Will seem brittle and delicate? It's all insufficient. So, he tucks Will up close to him, holding his head to his neck, and hopes that's enough.

The cold seeps under his coat eventually, and Will shivers in his arms after a particularly long gust of wind. Mike curses quietly, flipping

through his keys.

“Sorry,” Will mumbles, staring at his feet as he beats them against the ground to knock the snow off.

Mike stops, key halfway in the door. “You don’t ever have to apologize to me for that,” he says. “I’m serious.”

Will looks up at him and smiles, but it looks drawn. He’s faking. “OK.”

Mike accepts it for the moment being. He unlocks the door all the way, ducking to press a kiss to Will’s temple, and smiles when Will leans into him. It’s already been bumpy and strained, and Mike knows from experience that it’s going to get worse before it gets better, but for now, in that moment, things seem alright. “Do you want to help me decorate?”

Will, who had started staring off, pulls away to look up at Mike. His eyes are lit with some of his old fire, but then his expression shutters, and he’s furrowed his eyebrows, confused. “You didn’t already decorate?”

“It’s only, like, the 14th, Will.”

Will ducks his head down, mouth open like he can’t believe what he’s hearing. “It’s practically too late!”

He barrels through the door, and Mike laughs, hanging his keys up. “Will!”

Mike closes the door.

-

“Don’t you think you should give Thanksgiving more time to grieve?” Mike asks, watching Will hang up lights around the kitchen.

“We’ll grieve when we eat the turkey’s corpse,” Will says, pulling tinsel off the bottom of his sock. He throws it in the trash, and Mike watches him walk around the kitchen, box under his arm.

"It's not December for another month."

Will looks at him, holds eye contact, and slips a fat, smiling Santa Claus head on the knob of one of their drawers. It's aggressive, and Mike covers his mouth to hide his smile. "Time means nothing. It's cold, and thus," he slaps a magnetic reindeer on the fridge, "it is Christmas."

"It gets cold in spring, too. Can you explain that?"

Will walks through the doorway and back into the living room, hand rummaging through his box. "It's Santa's magic lingering. It's like you've never taken a science class."

Mike laughs, following Will. "You haven't believed in Santa in--"

He stops, halfway through the doorway, mouth still open, and stares at the mistletoe Will is holding above their heads. Will is flushed from his neck to the tips of his ears, but his face looks determined.

Mike can't get ahold of himself. His stomach is flipping, heart beating about in his chest, and all he process is, Will likes me back. All he can process means he's not paying enough attention to the Will right in front of him, who is taking his silence the wrong way.

Will's arm drops, jolts to a stop, and lowers slowly. He smiles, but it's awkward and pained, and he looks off to the side. "It was, um," he says, worrying his lip, "just a joke."

Mike blinks, hand jumping up to stop Will. "Wait."

He can feel his own face going hot as he slips the mistletoe out of Will's hand, and he pinches the loop between his fingers, holding it above both of their heads. Will's eyes widen, tracking his every movement, and Mike feels like his face is on fire.

He leans down, and Will closes his eyes. Mike stops, staring, and can't help but remember every time he's thought about how beautiful Will is. This moment, seeing Will waiting patiently on the balls of his feet, eyes closed and face untroubled, takes the cake.

Will's mouth pops open, just the slightest bit, and-- "You're staring," he says, peeking out from one eye. He laughs quietly when Mike jolts.

“Close your eyes!” Mike hisses.

Will laughs again, loud and unrestrained, and bounces up and down on his toes, but he closes his eyes. “Then kiss me!”

Mike pushes him down by his shoulder so he stops moving, and kisses him. It’s barely more than a brush of lips, but Will smiles against his mouth.

“Merry Christmas,” he whispers into the barely-there space between them.

Will laughs and laughs and laughs, tucking his face into Mike’s shoulder, and Mike pulls him close, burying his smile in Will’s skin. Will is wrapped around him in every sense of the word, and Mike thinks that it is more than enough.